Kanon:Volume 2

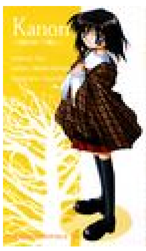
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Novel Illustrations

These are novel illustrations that were included in Kanon Volume 2.



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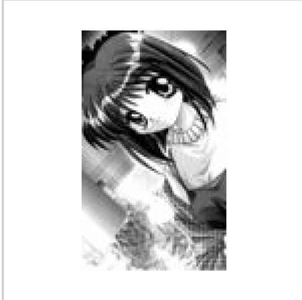
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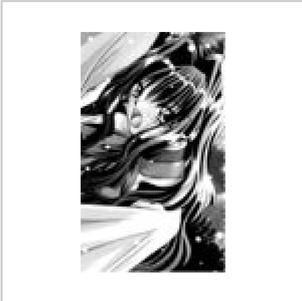
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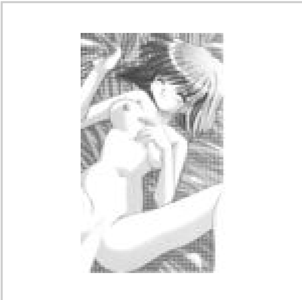
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Prologue

A lot of fairy tales begin like this.

Two sisters live in a place somewhere.

The older sister is ambitious, likes to bully people, and proud of her own beauty. Every day, she keeps bullying her younger, kind sister.

The older sister thought this unfair. She believed she didn't do this because she liked to be harsh on her sister.

It was just that merely looking at her sister, looking at her clear, pale brown eyes was painful, depressing, and irresistible.

It was because she loved her sister that made it more painful.

“Hey.”

“Ah?”

My contemplation was distracted by someone’s call from behind.

“It’s snowing again, you see.”

“Oh, right.”

Aizawa Yuichi and I, Kaori, stood alongside and gazed at the sky.

Upon going out the entrance, we could see white flakes falling between the school buildings.

“It’s getting cold again, I guess.”

Yuichi shrugged, puffing some white smoke.

“Snowflakes these small would end quickly.”

“Even so, it’ll be cold.”

I laughed at his sad look in attempting to oppose the weather.

“What are you talking about? Today’s quite warm already.”

I was quite knowledgeable in this since I had grown and lived in this snowy town.

“I think I’m going back to my country.”

“Just give up already.”

“Country? Which Country?” I said, smiling, lightly patting my shoulder.

Yuichi was assigned to my class.

For some reason, I heard he was now staying at my good friend Minase’s place.

“Does Nayuki have club activities?”

“Yeah, I can’t believe she can be having some track activities in such snow.”

The two of us headed to the gate.

“What are you going to do now, Aizawa?”

“I think there’s a place I want to go to.”

“Is it somewhere suspicious?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because Nayuki told me you’re unbelievable.”

“I’m in no way unbelievable.”

“Is that so?”

Even from my eyes, I could tell Yuichi was not a person easy to understand.

It was just a very normal chat, but he could get to the point of what others say despite showing wandering eyes. Perhaps he looked quite similar to that child...

No.

I am thinking of that child again.

“The main point is where do you think is suspicious?”

Hearing him, I guided our conversation to a new path.

“The bread shop near the station.”

“How’s that suspicious?”

“They use a signing pen to rub away the expiry date.”

“Um...that really is suspicious.”

“Am I right? I can buy one for you to eat next time.”

“No way!”

“If it’s Aizawa, I think he might be able to eat it.”

“Do you think my intestines can make miracles happen?”

“Of course not.”

I creased my brows, smiling.

Upon hearing him say *miracle*, I remembered about that child.

It’s called a miracle because it doesn’t happen, my older sister.

You were right, but how was I to answer you when I see you saying that smiling.

“Kaori, is there anything troubling you?”

Yuichi looked at me with the corner of his eye.

“Nothing. What’s up?”

"Because you look the same as the time when I just called to you back then."

He could tell my expression without looking directly at me. He was indeed unbelievable.

Even so, I didn't reply and said, "Right. I'm heading this way. How about you?"

We reached a diverging point after passing through the gate.

Yuichi pointed to the opposite direction.

"I see. So see you tomorrow."

I turned around and ran on the fine snow.

"Eh, hey, Kaori."

"See you!"

Safe, safe…I almost spoke something unnecessary to him. I should have been more careful.

A lot of shoujo mangas (mangas aimed at young girls) have this setting.

Two sisters live in a place somewhere.

The older sister is a beauty, but the younger sister is insignificant and untalented, who always looked up to her sister.

The younger sister thought this unfair, but she knew it was the truth.

She doesn't hate how she looks like in the mirror, but however she looked at herself, it is incongruous with her sister's curly long hair.

Not only is her sister beautiful but also smart, ranking first in grades in her year.

Compared to her, I—let alone grades—I can't even really go to school.

Right.

My mere presence hurts her.

I always smile so as not to hurt her, but the more I did, the more sorrow her eyes grew. I can do nothing about it.

So I…I…

Whoosh!

A cold, sudden hit on Shiori's head distracted her contemplation.

"…wah!"

Moving backwards in reflex, I find something frozen to ice. I slipped and fell into a sitting position.

"Ah…"

The things I bought in the convenience store were scattered on the ground. I couldn't let them be, but I couldn't comprehend what happened and just stared into space.

"Do you still feel okay?"

From the side of the road, a young stranger approached me. His age was similar to mine or a bit older.

"Eh…ah…"

Being pulled back to reality from my convoluted thoughts, I couldn't adjust myself at the spot. I just sat there, knowing nothing to say.

"What's wrong?"

Behind the young man was a small, adorable young girl. She has wearing a strange bag decorated by wings, her mittens pressing her nose.

"It seems to be the snow on the branches. Your face hit the tree and it did that."

"You sound like you're blaming me."

The girl with mittens oddly called herself as boku (a male referral).

"Isn't it the truth?"

"The reason I hit the tree is because you evaded me!"



"But you ambushed me."

"You're rude! It's not an ambush. It's just a sentimental reunion!"

"How's it sentimental?"

"I'm saying, I tried to make it sentimental, but you…"

The two of them bombarded each other, treating me like their crosstalk audience.

The two of them looked like they were either friends who came together in this town after many years or childhood friends.

"Okay, let's leave that aside for now."

"Don't leave it aside!"

Turning away from the protesting girl with mittens, the young man called Yuichi came to face me.

"So can you stand up? Did you get injured anywhere?"

He placed his hand lightly on my head and brushed away the snow there. I stole a glance through the hair on my forehead and looked at that hand. It was a warm and large palm.

As I didn't feel any pain, I simply nodded. But since the ambience Yuichi and that girl created by their close relationship was too intense I couldn't stand up and kept my head lowered.

"...Eh. Okay, let me help you pick up those stuff."

The girl stretched her hand on my bag on the snow.

"Ah!"

No. It was the first time I had such a swift reaction. Although there were only some snacks, stationery, and boring stuff inside...

"What's wrong?"

The girl immediately stopped.

"Um...it's nothing, really."

Anyway I retrieved my sense of reality and started picking up the things around me. Yuichi stretched his hand towards me. I gently held his hand. As imagined, his hand warm hand held my small hand with force and pulled me up.

Once I stood up, the snowflakes on my shoulders and my cape fell down all together. As I picked up and checked my stuff, I put them back into my bag.

Having done so, I glimpsed, unintentionally, at Yuichi, who was still looking at me. I felt my face becoming a bit red. To hide my embarrassment, I pulled the cape on my shoulder that had lowered upwards to its original position.

"Hey. Which grade are you in?"

The girl looked at me with eyes full of spirit.

"...first grade."

I even told her the name of the school I had barely gone to.

"Ah. So you're in the same school as I am?"

"'Really?"

Hearing what Yuichi said, I made such an excited, large sound I would never make and became embarrassed again, tucking the tip of my nose into my cape.

But Yuichi and the girl didn't seem to have noticed my waver.

"So you're one year below me."

"Ah! So you're in the same year as I am?"

“Yeah!”

“I didn’t know…I reckoned…”

“What did you reckon?”

Although that girl put on a smile on her face, her eyes and her voice contained nothing of a smile.

Yuichi, on the other hand, seemed to be trying to get over it with a joke.

I secretly heaved a sigh.

What was I thinking all alone? Stories that start through an accidental encounter on the road only exist in shoujo manga.

“Soon the sky will get dark.”

I spoke softly, looking at the sky. The orange setting sun exposed itself among the gaps between the grey clouds.

“You’re right. It’s time to go.”

Yuichi and that girl looked at the sky I was looking at.

“So we have to go too.”

“Sure.”

“Are you really fine? Does anywhere hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry for making snow hit your head.”

The girl lowered her head a bit.

“…It’s fine.”

The two of them said and waved me goodbye, and then walked on the evening road.

“Um.”

I didn’t plan to make a voice, but it rushed out of my mouth.

“Yes?”

Yuichi turned around.

“Um…nothing, forget it.”

I gave it up.

When I remember I had been occupied by those troubles when I met them, I felt it weird to tell it to them now.

"Oh, I forgot something to ask too."

Yuichi asked me how to go back to the shopping district. *Why were these two wandering around here when they even know the directions?* Thinking about these weird things to myself, I told him the directions.

"Thanks. It's great you stopped me."

"N-Not really."

As such, I saw them off again.

The swaying wings on the girl's backpack were very adorable.

Reality isn't like a shoujo manga.

It's called a miracle because it doesn't happen.

But…

Only in my heart I said to Yuichi who was already far from me.

Um…

Could I…see you again?

Chapter 1 - She Loves Vanilla Ice Cream

Arghh…

Again I stopped myself from letting out a yawn near the end of the fourth lesson.

Today's weather was oddly good. Looking through the windows to the court, I could see the snow piled up yesterday night reflecting the white afternoon sunlight.

The court, in the middle of school buildings, was white and plain, covered with snow, no one to be seen there.

But there were clearly a pair of footprints on the plain snow ground.

These footprints lead to a girl who wasn't wearing a uniform.

Uh?

"Hey."

Kitagawa, sitting behind me, poked my back with a mechanical pencil.

"Aizawa, you've noticed that person there as well?"

"Yeah."

"That girl has been standing there for a while. She just stood there as still as a doll."

"Is she asleep?"

Kitagawa's head drooped.

"Hey, do you really think that someone would sleep with that posture?"

"Perhaps this person would."

I pointed to my cousin Nayuki beside me who was in deep sleep.

"…Maybe you're right."

Kitagwa agreed, kind of speechless. I should have known, after living for several days with my cousin, that she always fell asleep, the parade of her alarm clocks in the morning proved to be of no avail; and when she was sleepy, she would close her eyes with a "ku" sound, even while she was eating or talking.

"There aren't so many people like Minase around. But that girl's weird on a different level."

"Say, it's cold even when the sun's up. She'd be gone soon."

"Hm, perhaps."

Noticing our conversation, the teacher eyed at us, and we thus stopped talking. Still, I often looked out through the window, restless and worried.

The girl still stood there, waiting.

Her apparent small figure, shoulder-length hair, and a warm cape on her shoulders that embraced this body.

I probably know who this girl was.

The bell for the end of the fourth lesson rang.

The girl at the court could have heard it too, as she seemed to have looked up to the windows of the school building.

I was right.

I had seen this girl.

She was the girl I met with Ayu yesterday when we lost our way.

To head out to the court, I must open the heavy door at the end of the corridor.

The door wasn't locked, but in this cold weather, even freaks wouldn't want to head out.

That being said, though, I rejected Nayuki's and Kitagawa's offer to eat at the cafeteria and opened that frozen steel door.

Immediately the cold air outside assaulted me. Gahh, cold. I rubbed my hands for warmth and looked around.

I got her.

Alone among the snow, the girl blended in as her skin was as white as snow.

It was only a coincidence that I had met her yesterday evening, but I couldn't help feeling attached to the girl.

I was still worried of her fear and loss then when the stuff in her bag fell out and was picked up by someone else.

But I didn't know how to strike a conversation with her, so I just raised my hand.

"Hey."

"...eh."

The girl turned around to face me. Her fresh brown hair lights up her small face. From the colour of her skin and her iris I could tell she didn't dye them, but that she had less black pigment. Her fingertips that held her cape were white and small, giving off a dreamy aura.

I stood in front of her silently, struck by the impression that if I were to say anything wrong, she would hence vanish.

Shortly after, the girl smiled.

"What are you doing here?"

"What I am doing..."

Seeing her smile and talk, I followed the topic she started.

"I saw someone suspicious in the court, so I came here to check."

"Really? Thanks."

The girl gave a polite and formal bow.

"I didn't see anyone of that sort."

"That person's right here."

I pointed to that girl.

"Me?"

She placed her fingers on her lips and titled her head.

"Why? I'm a student here."

Of course she had told me she was a student yesterday.

"Then why are you standing here in your casual clothes?"

"Because I'm absent today."

"That's just skipping school."

"This isn't."

The girl smiled again.

"I have been on leave for some time now. I have a condition, but it's getting worse lately."

"I see."

Her condition matched the weakness the girl evoked, so I just nodded my understanding.

"But I got out of bed today to meet someone."

"Is this person in this school?"

The girl smiled and gave no reply. The answer seemed obvious, though.

"May I know what sickness that is?"

"Okay."

The girl lowered her head. I pondered whether I should have asked, but the girl quickly stated her answer with a smile.

"It's a cold."

"..."

"What? Why do you look so drained all of a sudden?"

"Nothing."

I just thought it would have been something more serious.

"Would it sound better if I contract something more serious?"

"Oh, of course not."

Her correct guess of what I thought threw me into a little panic.

"Well, it can be said as an influenza."

"You don't have to refer to with a harder term."

Drained, in some other level, I wanted to sit down, but not in the snow. Glancing around, I found a bench used for fencing the flowers. I shoved away the snow on top of it and invited the girl to sit with me.

"Speaking of which, we haven't yet introduced ourselves."

"Right. I'm Aizawa."

"Yuichi-kun, right?"

“How did you know my name?”

“Because that’s how that girl called you yesterday.”

“You have such a good memory.”

The girl’s face became red.

“As you say, I actually have a good memory.”

“It’s enviable.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and…”

I’m Misaka Shiori.”

“Misaka?”

I had heard of this surname, yet because of my contrastingly inapt ability of remembering things I couldn’t tell where I had heard of it.

“Is it some weird surname?”

Shiori looked at my face with unease.

“Of course not.”

“Have I made Yuichi-senpai tired or dissatisfied?”

“It’s nothing at all.”

She presented herself different from the impression she made, I guess. I was a bit more intrigued to talk with her.

“So, um…”

“Please call me Shiori.”

“Yes, Shiori. Aren’t you hungry?”

“Shall we have lunch together?” invited I.

After several minutes, I walked, holding two bags, my head swaying in confusion.

I opened the heavy door again to the court. Having gone indoors, I had to get used to the cold outside once again, feeling as cold as the first time I got out, my shoulders shivering.

Shiori was waiting for me at the same place.

She accepted my lunch invitation, but…

“It’s cold here. Why don’t we get inside? If you’re worried someone might see you not in your uniform, we can find somewhere desolate like the stairs or something.”

Shiori shook her head to my suggestion.

“I like this place.”

“You like this place? Don’t you have a cold? It’ll become more serious if you stick around here. Besides, you’ve been here even before the lunch break.”

“Yuichi-senpai, have you been looking at me all the time?”

“This doesn’t matter!”

Probably to excuse my embarrassment, I asked Shiori what she wanted to eat so I could buy and take them here.

A while later, I did get what she wanted.

“Have you bought it?”

Shiori greeted me happily.

“Yes. But are you really fine with only this?”

I handed it to her, remaining my doubt.

“Thanks.”

Shiori took it with her slender hands.

“It’s really the vanilla one. Wonderful!”

“...”

“Yuichi-senpai, you’re upset again. Do you want to eat ice cream too?”

“No.”

I just couldn’t figure the mindset of someone who would want to eat ice cream as lunch outdoors in this cold season.

“I’m eating?”

Shiori said with a singing tone, opened the cover to the vanilla, scraped a spoon of sold white ice cream, and stuffed it into her mouth.

“Yummy.”

The spoon still in her mouth, she squinted in joy.

Sitting beside her, I remained silent, taking a bite of my tuna sandwich.

“My body feels cold just from looking at it.”

“Really?”

Shiori attacked her ice cream with the spoon, making them soft before putting it in her mouth. The white ice cream damped her soft, open lips.

“Yuichi-senpai, do you hate ice cream?”

“I don’t hate it, but it depends on the weather.”

“Ice cream is my favourite. I can eat it all day.”

“Well, I think it won’t be nasty.”

I wouldn’t take responsible, though, if her cold worsened.

“So, take a bite.”

Without hesitation, Shiori scooped a spoon of ice cream with the spoon she used and handed it over.

If I ate this, I would be having an indirect kiss despite knowing her for only a while. Still, the white stuff in front of me puffed white smoke.

“To be honest, my doctor told me to stay away from ice cream.”

I rejected her indirect kissing offer, a bit regretfully…No, I rejected her ice cream.

“I see.”

Shiori nodded intently and stuffed the ice cream into her mouth.

“Shiori, don’t you feel bad from eating cold stuff here?”

“My doctor didn’t tell me to stay away from ice cream.”

Sure, normal doctors wouldn’t expect their patients to eat ice cream outdoors in the winter.

I stole a glance at her.

“Yuichi-senpai, your doctor wouldn’t blame you for one small bite.”

Shiori insisted that I wanted to eat ice cream.

I wanted to heed to her lengthy explanation and try a bite, but the sole thought of the icy cold seeping into my teeth deterred me.

“I decide to listen to my doctor.”

“Yuichi-senpai, you got my appreciation.”

Shiori spoke as if touched, and sent another spoon of ice cream into her mouth.

“It’s very good.”

If her dialogue were textual, a heart symbol of indulgence would be added to the end of her line.

“Shiori, you’re mysterious.”



Perhaps I was referred as mysterious or the like by my classmates, but I had forgotten.

“In what way?”

“Hmm. It’s as if your body is made of snow.”

She had skin as white as snow; she ate ice cream in the chilly weather.

She seemed she would vanish if anything ticked off, yet her smiling, innocent face took no notice. She was a girl to be worried, to be protected.

“You’re a romantic person, Yuichi-senpai.”

Shiori laughed, retrieving my attention.

“I hope you aren’t serious.”

Romance just didn’t fit my character. I saw, though, Shiori’s enchanted face.

“You and I are both living people. Look.”

Before I knew what was happening, Shiori touched my hands. I swallowed the soft surprised gasp back to my throat. Light pink, small and long fingers. The slight touch of her fingertips was warmer than I expected. My fingers, in contrast, turned cold in the chilly air.

“I know, but your hands are so warm you seem to have a fever.”

I slowly moved my hand away, trying to tell her I didn’t hate being touched, even though this mere sensation made me restless.

“I’d suggest you go back inside.”

I continued to persuade her.

“I can’t get in without my uniform.”

But Shiori rejected flatly.

“They won’t see you if it’s just a while.”

“They definitely will see me.”

“You lack the spirit, I say.”

“Even if I do have the spirit, they’ll see me, besides…”

Shiori, who had been smiling, suddenly looked down.

She didn't continue what she had been saying.

I remembered what I had forgotten: the desperate and frightened look on Shiori when I first met her.

Why is she having the same look now?

Shiori looked up and gazed at the school building.

The school building looked close and dull, yet in her eyes they seemed far and inaccessible.

A nameless sense of grief filled my heart.

"...yesterday..."

"Woah!"

Shiori's sudden diversion to speaking freaked me out.

"I didn't say anything yet."

Shiori looked unhappy.

"Sorry. What happened yesterday?"

"Yesterday, what's the girl called?"

"Do you mean Ayu?"

"Ayu-chan, is it?"

What a cute name, Shiori commented, nodding.

"The '-chan' doesn't really fit her."

I could tell Shiori wanted to derail the topic, but I still went with her flow.

"But she is older than me."

"It sounds hard to believe."

"Ayu-chan doesn't study in this school, does she?"

"Maybe."

Shiori was sceptical of my answer.

"Honestly, I know as much about her as you'd probably do."

"But she said yesterday it was a reunion after seven years."

"That's what she claim. Nothing in me agrees."

"Still..."

Shiori seemed worried of how I would react. In her eyes she pursued the reason behind.

I nodded and commenced.

“In the past, I’d come to this town every winter. Probably snow occurred treasurable to me in this town because it didn’t snow at where I live.”

“I can understand.”

“But one year I stopped coming. I can’t really remember why, though. What was left was a strong reluctance to come to this town again.”

“...”

Shiori said nothing more, her face hinted with concern, looking silently at me.

“I came here this time because of my parent’s work. I came here first because I had to change to the local school. I’m now living at my relative’s house.”

“So is Ayu your relative?”

“No. I met Ayu yesterday at the shopping district. She knocked me from behind all of a sudden with taiyakis in her hands.”

“Taiyakis, hm.”

“Taiyakis, indeed. She even told me in a serious tone she was being chased. Before I could ask her what was happening, I saw an old man seeing taiyaki running madly to us. She told me she was being chased; and I told her she was a taiyaki thief.”

A vivid picture of what happened popped up in my head, and I laughed it off.

“Did you also help her to get away with stealing?”

“No way. I was just caught with her flow.”

“I see.”

Shiori placed her thumb beside her lips and looked down like a detective.

“So Ayu-chan were friends with you many years ago, and when you two met each other after so long, you end up being chased together.”

“I suppose you can put it that way.”

Something was off. I was speaking with a girl called Shiori, so why did she have to talk about Ayu. I was afraid of talking about my lost memories or even my past—well, Nayuki will certainly know, still—I have never talked about it with even my closest classmates. But I had easily told Shiori. Or even, I hoped Shiori would know more about me.

“Ayu-chan and you sound like a soap opera. It’s so cool.”

Shiori held the cape on her shoulder and heaved a sigh.

“Do you really think so?”

I would rather say it was a comedy show than a soap opera.

“I do. While at face value you two argue, but emotionally, you…”

“Wuahahaha!”

“You’re rude. Please don’t burst into laughter.”

“My apologies.”

Shiori, I’m afraid that’s beyond me ability. How do you expect me to confess to that little thing?

“Is it really that weird for a girl to dream of a soap-opera-like love relationship?”

Shiori spoke softly, her thin face titled to a small angle.

“Is this dream really plain and stupid?”

“I never said that.”

“Sorry.”

We fell into a while of silence.

The ice cream cup Shiori was holding had long been empty.

I had also finished my lunch.

Before the moment for “Let’s call it a day, then” came, I grasped my final chance and shot the question.

“Shiori.”

“Yes.”

Shiori immediately replied, seemingly prepared.

“Shiori, do you really think like that?”

“Longing for a love relationship?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course. That’s my dream.”

Shiorit looked afar again, but then she suddenly fixed her attention at me.

Her eyes were pale but abysmal and pretty.

They sent a thought to me, though it was probably my own imagination.

The person she wanted to see was me.

When she knew I was in her school, she sneaked out of bed despite her cold to bump into me.

Could it be?

"...ah."

The ringing bell reminded us of the end of the lunch break.

Shiori shoved away the snow on her skirt and the upper part of her cape, and stood up.

"Can I come again?"

"During the lunch break, sure."

I should have told her not to come if her cold hadn't worn off, but I couldn't.

I was excited by the sole idea of meeting her again.

"But it might be better if you cure your cold first."

Anyway, I still wanted to sound reasonable.

"Haha, I understand."

Shiori laughed.

"Well then. I'm going back home now."

Shiori gave a light bow and turned away.

Heading to the school gate, she chose her steps carefully on those she and I had stepped on, as if not wanting to increase the footprints on the snow.

I saw her off.

Can we soon see each other again? In my heart, I asked her leaving back.

Then as if our hearts connected, she turned lightly around.

"See you tomorrow."

"Wuu..."

Left alone, the coldness I had forgotten seeped back into my body.

Checking that Shiori was nowhere to be seen, I swiftly got back into the classroom.

"Yuichi, where did you go?"

"I had something to take care of."

When I replied Nayuki, I saw the person behind me, reminding me of something.

"Oh right, Kaori!"

“What’s Kaori?”

Kaori furrowed her brow, looking at me doubtfully.

“Kaori’s surname is Misaka, don’t you remember?”

“Yeah.”

“Kaori, don’t you have a younger sister?”

The impression Kaori and Shiori made was entirely different, but with closer observation, the whiteness of their skin, the brightness of their hair, as well as the contours of their face resembled each other. Their voice was similar too.

“No. I don’t have a sister.”

But Kaori denied flatly.

“Really?”

“Yes Why are you so convinced I have a sister?”

“...I’m just guessing.”

“Really?”

Kaori looked at me with renewed suspicion.

“...really.”

“Really?”

“You don’t have to pry further if you really don’t have a sister.”

“...”

Kaori crossed her hands in front of her chest, rendered silent.

“What happened?”

Nayuki smiled leisurely.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing.”

Kaori and I said in unison. Of course, I knew there was *something*

Kaori was related to Shiori. Kaori may insist if she wants, but Shiori might well be sister.

So was Kaori the person Shiori wanted to meet?

Still, if they were sisters, they should be living together. There was no need for her to drag herself along with her cold to school.

The teacher lecturing the afternoon lessons came into the classroom.

My classmates returned to their seats.

I also returned to my seat beside the window, wondering whether I should bring this up the next time I see Shiori.

Probably I shouldn’t ask too much about their private matters.

But I had gone as far as telling Shiori affairs I was reluctant to share with other people.

Maybe Shiori could feel the same thing I felt from her. If that was the case, she might just stunningly lay them out open and wide.

Anyway, that would only be possible until I could meet her again.

I rested my eyes on the court.

No one was there now, save two pairs of footprints.



Chapter 2 - First Date?

“Kaori Misaka? Yeah. She’s my elder sister.”

Shiori’s overly prompt answer was unsettling.

“Um. Were your biological mothers different and you two didn't see each other after you were born? Or were one of you raised in a rich family while the other one in a poor family who managed by delivering newspapers?”

Shiori widened her eyes.

“You know too well, Yuichi-senpai.”

“Really?”

“I lied.”

“So what’s the deal?!”

If we weren’t in a court stacked with snow, I would have thrown myself to a side and rolled on the ground.

“If it were true, though, it would be as fantastic as a soap opera.”

Shiori smiled and ate her ice cream.

Since our first meeting with her here, I had been coming to the court every lunch break.

We didn't make any special promise, but she would also come every time. And even when I ask her whether she had something else she wanted to eat, she would just reply she wanted to eat ice cream.

I still worried over her ice-cream-fueled body, but succumbed to her unreasonable smile, I continued buying ice cream at the tuck shop for her.

Of course, my primary worry remained to be whether she should even go out with a cold.

“Yuichi-senpai, why don't you eat ice cream today too?”

“The nasty frosty feeling invading from my mouth to my body and then assailing my heart is too much for me! Stop asking me to eat ice cream!”

I was indulged with such delightful conversations that I always lost the chance to tell her to stay at home to take care of her body.

The more I learn about Shiori, the more I feel that the initial impression of dreaminess and fear she made had transformed to a small girl who smiled adorably.

“By the way, about what I mentioned earlier.”

I said with caution because I found her eager to encourage me to eat ice cream.

“About my sister?”

Shiori seemed to be sending ice cream into her mouth with her wooden spoon, but she had nimbly been sending it to me.

“My sister and I are just normal sisters in a normal family.”

Shiori shook her spoon and ate the ice cream herself.

The way she spoke the word sister hinted a bit of playfulness.

With her natural tone, I couldn't help but pursue, “Then why did Kaori tell me she didn't have a sister.”

“Eh...”

The smile on Shiori's face disappeared.

It was too late to regret what I had said. Shiori said nothing, and ate two mouthfuls of ice cream. The joy we were in was lost.

What an idiot I was. How could I have been so unattentive?

I wanted to punch myself in the face.

Nevertheless, Shiori slowly faced me and showed her usual smile.

“Then it must be my mistake.”

"Your mistake?"

"Yes. A person you know have the same name and surname as my sister."

"..."

"My sister must be in another class."

Could that be? Even if there were really someone else named 'Kaori,' it is uncommon to find the surname "Misaka'. For two people to have the same surname and name in the same school? Who's joking?

"It seems otherwise, but I think I've probably got it wrong."

I decided to refrain from asking.

If Shiori claimed so, let it be.

"...Yuichi-senpai, do you like the snow?"

Suddenly kneeling down, Shiori gathered the snow beside her feet with her hands.

"I hate it."

"Why?"

"Because it's cold."

I could tell there were other reasons, but I couldn't remember since they happen to fall in the empty gap of memories.

"I like snow very much."

Shiori made a small snowball with the snow she gathered.

"Because they're beautiful."

She then rolled the snowball on the snow ground. Upon touching the icy snow, her white fingertips turned red.

The snowball gradually became larger, from a table tennis ball to a tennis ball, then to a soft ball.

"Yuichi-senpai, want to make a snowman?"

Shiori lifted her gaze from the snowball to me.

"Right now?"

"Yes. Right now."

"I don't mind. But aren't you born here? Didn't you make a hell lot of snowmen when you're small that you don't want to make them again?"

This might be the case for me. Every winter I would pay a visit to this town, making snowmen and playing with Nayuki. We even competed to see who could make more snowmen, and brought those we like home that gave trouble to her mother Akiko.

I liked snow too, back then.

“I want to make a big snowman.”

“How big?”

Shiori looked up, as if checking her goal.

“Around 10 metres.”

“That’s out of the question!”

That’s a snow statue, not a snowman.

“We have a lot of resources for that.”

“Even so, it’s still out of the question.”

“No?”

Shiori placed her index finger on her lips. It seemed this was her habit when she was thinking of something.

“Do you know this, Shiori? A snowman is basically composed of three balls. For it to be 10 metres long, the ball’s diameter would have to be at least 3 metres long. Even if we could make a three-metre snowball, how are we going to put it on a body with a height of seven metres? Do you understand why it’s out of the question now?”

“Yuichi-senpai, you’ve got a lot of spirit.”

“Even if I have the spirit, it’s out of the question!”

“I hate people who talk like that.”

Shiori pouted.

“When I was small, I had always dreamt of making a big snowman.”

But as she continued, the edge of her mouth lifted up.

Feeling that the heavy mood had gone, I heaved a sigh.

Now I knew that I wanted to help her wish come true.

“I get you. Let’s a big snowman then.”

“Really?”

Shiori’s eyes flashed adorably. They were eyes that would waver your heart. A little flustered, I avoided from looking at her.

“But we can’t do it now. We need a lot of time and effort, so let’s spend an entire day outside when you’ve fully recovered.”

“Okay.”

“I can’t promise you that it’ll be 10 metres.”

“It’s fine.”

Shiori curled the lower part of her cape in circles with her fingertip.

At the same time, the bell for the end of the lunch break rang.

“Let’s call it a day, then.”

“Sure.”

Shiori gave a bow, and turned away as usual.

Then an icy blowing wind coursed through the court.

“Woah!”

In a panic, Shiori pressed down her flying skirt and cape.

“I didn’t see anything.”

Though extremely unfortunate, this was true.

“The wind is up. You should get home.”

“Okay.”

Shiori walked as she turned away.

“Can you go home by yourself?”

“I’m not a child anymore. Of course I can.”

“Only children make snowmen.”

“I hate people who talk like that.”

Her grumpiness was confined only in her voice, for her face betrayed a smile. I found out that I felt good when she articulated the word *hate*.

Good, now ensues my journey of letting her hate me more. With that inner declaration, I raised my head, looking at the windows of the school building.

Woah.

It was only a second, but I could swear I saw a long, curled, unmistakable hair.

I was looking at my classroom.

Had been Kaori been looking at us?

Fine snow began to fall, and hence I hurried my pace back to the classroom.

“You’re back, Yuichi.”

Nayuki greeted me with her usual slow tone.

It was weird for someone living with me to say ‘you’re back’ at school.

“Did you have your lunch outside?”

“Yeah.”

“By yourself?”

“Not really.”

I didn’t want to spill all the beans and inform her of every detail about someone who wore their causal clothes to school every lunch.

“What could be so delicious to eat that you have to go outside and risk the cold?”

But Nayuki seemed she was more interested in what I ate than whom I met.

Her easy personality did save me some trouble, thankfully.

“It’s ice cream.”

I stunned her.

“Ice cream?”

“Yeah. Oh, and I remember it’s the vanilla flavour.”

“I don’t think anyone would go outside in this weather to eat vanilla ice cream without any reason.”

“Yeah, you’ve got to have some reason behind.”

Kitagawa heard our conversation and chipped in.

Nayuki faced Kitagawa and said, “Well, probably he couldn’t wait for the weather to get warm.”

“Then that means he just likes ice cream.”

Even Kaori, who had arrived to her seat, came in.

“Does it matter? Everyone has their own likes and dislikes.”

Kaori came to a swift conclusion.

The afternoon session started, and our conversation ended without a clear resolution.

Back on my seat, I stole a glimpse at Kaori.

She spread her textbook and her notes on her table, as usual.

But I was certain something I said about Shiori bugged her.

I would just have to wait till after school to ask her again.

Sadly, before I even closed my textbook after the lesson, Kaori was gone from the classroom.

“She’s in a big panic.”

It seemed she scurried away.

“Her club’s very busy, I heard.”

I have to leave too, Nayuki said, stuffing her textbook into her bag slowly.

“Nayuki, you’re in the track team. So what club is Kaori in?”

“You want to know?”

Before Nayuki got to answer, Kitagawa nosed in again.

“No. Not really.”

“100 yen and I’ll tell you.”

“Do you want to spend 100 yen if you were me?”

“Ugh, my head hurts.”

Let it hurt, then, with that said, I left him alone and got out of the classroom.

Outside, the snow had been falling for some time.

On the following day, the entire court was white. The footprints Shiori and I left, as well as the small snowballs she and I made yesterday, were all covered by massive amounts of snow, leaving no trace.

“The usual, unspectacular court looks great too.”

Shiori glanced around the court, eating ice cream today as well.

I was wolfing down my sandwich while slurping my beverage.

Although I had something I wanted to tell her, my nervousness did not give way.

As such, I ate in an unintentional rush.

“This is a scene I want to capture and draw.”

Shiori formed a rectangle with her index fingers and her thumbs in front of herself. It was the usual gesture for photographers to set their frame.

“Shiori, do you draw still life?”

"…I like drawing."

A faint red layer fell on her white cheeks.

"I haven't been drawing lately, though."

"What do you draw?"

"Sceneries. When my body was better back then, I used to take my sketchbook with me wherever I go. Then I also drew people…I mean portraits."

"I see. Sounds quite formal."

I imagined how she would look like, taking her sketchbook to a corner of the street, some natural scenery, landscape and whatnot.

With her weak demeanor, Shiori must have suited drawing really well.

"It'll be great if I can have a look at your drawings."



"It won't. I'll get embarrassed."

Her face grew redder.

"I'm not good at it."

"I don't know any technical stuff as well."

I wanted to see it only because she drew it.

"So…I can let you, but you mustn't laugh."

"Okay, I won't."

Even though she was all smiles, if she couldn't bear the embarrassment, I must restrain myself from any crude act of teasing or laughing. Even if it happened to be beyond my apprehension, I would need to find any appreciable aspect to praise her.

Thus I made up my mind. Well, of course I didn't tease or laugh at her when I really saw her drawings later on…

"By the way, Shiori."

Having gobbled up my sandwich, I entered the main theme.

"Yes."

"School ends after the morning class tomorrow since it's Saturday. So there's no afternoon break, isn't it?"

“I believe so.”

Shiori looked down in slight regret.

“So, if you don’t mind, and if your condition allows, shall we go somewhere outside school?”

“Do you mean a date?”

Shiori said, in an unusual high pitch.

“Well, if you want to say it’s a date…”

I could get embarrassed too with that word out of my mouth.

“Kind of. We’re usually in school anyway.”

I though of a lot, but I decided not to pursue in asking her relationship with Kaori. Since Kaori was escaping the problem, I might only be bothering Shiori with my thoughtless questions.

And more importantly, I enjoy the time I had with Shiori now.

“It’s a date, isn’t it?”

“Well, um, I can’t say it’s not.”

“I’m excited. A date in the weekends has always been my dream.”

With her repetition of the word *date*, I wanted to take off and hit home, but I exercised patience by forcing my feet into the snow.

“So let’s meet here after I finish tomorrow’s lessons.”

“Sure.”

“So, for the meeting tomorrow, it’ll be nice if you can take a good rest today.”

“…I know. So, see you tomorrow.”

Shiori gave her usual bow and left.

I was overcome with the sophisticated feelings both of expectation to see her excited outside school and also how I should respond to her referral of this as a date.

A date meant I had to take her somewhere as a male. But I had just come here, and couldn’t quite remember things in the past, places I know where quickly exhaustible.

Was this a good idea?

And so the weekends arrived.

“Woah. There are so many people.”

Shiori expressed her novel awe at the wave of people in the shopping district.

"Sorry. Shiori, you must have come so many times you don't want to anymore. But this is the only place I can think of."

"I haven't."

Shiori shook her head.

"I don't go out usually, so the last time I've been here was when I was a child."

"Really?"

"Yes. If this shopping district hasn't changed, I remember there's a shop I like around here."

As if picking up her memories, Shiori walked around, and I followed behind.

"There. It's that shop."

At the corner of the shopping district, beside the arch door, there was a small shop selling kid stuff.

"There...you say."

When I first came to the shopping district after coming to this town, I had also stopped in front of this shop.

In front of the door of the shop were a machine selling capsule toys and large bottles filled with nostalgic glass pebbles. It was a shop loaded with all kinds of stuff.

When I was small, I had also come to this shop.

And I...

"Good afternoon."

"And right when I have almost got my hands on my memories, you crashed into me."

I turned around.

"Ah?"

The toy feathers shook behind the bag.

"Ah."

Shiori also turned to the voice.

"Eh? You're..."

"I'm Shiori. You're Ayu-chan, am I correct?"

Shoiri greeted Ayu with a smile. Ayu said, "So you're Shiori", and returned a smile.

"So you're with Yuichi-kun today?"

"Yes. We met several times at school later on, and today Yuichi-senpai is taking me out to play."

“I see. You did say you were in the same school as Yuichi-kun.”

They were in the same school, sure, but Ayu didn’t even notice the odd situation of Shiori wearing causal clothes but Yuichi wearing a school uniform.

“You’re by yourself today, Ayu-chan?”

“Yeah.”

Shiori was a bit nervous, but Ayu was so friendly she seemed like an old friend.

“Yuichi-kun, are you two dating?”

“Does it look like that?”

Asking her back, I was troubled that Ayu’s question could make my heart jump.

“Not-Not really.”

“Then what does it look like?”

“Hm…like a close brother and sister, I say.”

“Is that so…”

Shiori looked deplorable, but then she immediately changed it into a smile.

“If you don’t mind, would you come and tag along?”

Hearing Shiori’s question, I almost couldn’t hold down thrown-off voice.

“Is it okay?”

Ayu exchanged glances with Shiori and me.

Was it really okay for Shiori?

She said it was a date, and she looked forward to it.

“It’s okay.”

But Shiori only nodded, smiling. I could only follow suit.

The three of us went for a stroll at a CD shop.

I looked for the new albums of the genres I enjoyed, while Ayu and Shiori poking their heads behind me.

“Yuichi-senpai, you like to listen to this music. “

“Shiori, which ones do you like?”

“I can’t tell you.”

I asked her several times, but she wouldn't tell, maintaining her smile.

"Yuichi-kun," Then, Ayu whispered, "I saw Ayu holding onto something."

"Which one? Is it really some love song?"

Ayu's face tensed.

"I don't know, but there were scary drawings on them."

"..."

Well, the cover might be scary, but the contents could still be a love song.

I too tensed my face and nodded.

After a roundabout trip in the shop, we went to the arcade.



I was good at this stuff.

...still.

"What? You haven't played video games before, Shiori?"

"And this is my first time going into an arcade."

"I only know those machines that grab dolls."

"I see."

With that amount of knowledge, I wouldn't impress them even if I show my adept gaming combat skills.

So I decided to play those common games for starters.

Air table tennis was one.

"This should be easy. Grab this oval object and hit the red flat ball. You lose if the ball falls into the hole in front you."

"Sounds easy."

"I understand."

"Ayu and Shiori. Try and play against each other."

Sending the copper coins inside, I stood in the centre to view their battle.

“Let’s start over here. Go!”

Pang.

Ayu swung her arm energetically, but the ball moved on the table like a snail.

“My heart is beating so fast…it’s coming…heh.”

Pang?

Shiori countered it seriously, but the ball moved even slower.

“Ugu, it’s scary. Yo!”

Plank?

“Ayu-chan. Let’s do this. Go!”

Pang?

“Enough!”

I couldn’t stand their conversation that disfigured the game’s beat.

“It’s my bad that I let you two battle. But, hey, Shiori, you should take off your cape when you’re playing. Ayu, won’t you put down your bag before you move?”

“I see.”

“I didn’t notice.”

I was so drained I couldn’t even make a sarcastic remark. And thus we went to the next gaming machine.

Whac-a-mole.

“You should know this, right? You only need to use this hammer to hit those moles shooting from those holes.”

I handed the plastic hammer to Shiori.

“I’m so nervous.”

“Good luck, Shiori.”

Ayu cheered her at a side.

Coins inserted and button pressed, the modified children’s song played and the game commenced.

“…Um.”

Shiori’s eyes swam back and forth at the popping and shrinking moles, her hands tightly holding the hammer.

“It started.”

"I-I'm aware of that."

At last, Shiori hit on a hole with nothing there.

"Your timing is wrong, Shiori."

"It's here, Shiori."

"I know…it's just…oh…wait…"

Shiori called for them with her might, yet the moles vanished within their holes with their laughing malice.

After two minutes…

"It's over."

Shiori put down the hammer sorrowfully.

The moles continued laughing for their victory, and the score was displayed.

"This is the first time I saw a score of zero."

"I don't have any sporty nerves after all."

Shiori threw the cape over herself, a bit grumpy. She had moved for a while, yet no sweat was on her body.

"Well, that's a kind of skill and achievement on its own."

"I hate people who say things like that the most!"

"I'm joking."

"It still hurts me."

"Yeah, it's your bad, Yuichi-kun."

Ayu stood at her side.

"By the way, the next one is you?"

When I decided to give Ayu the hammer, she raised her hand in rejection.

"I don't want to play this."

"Why? Isn't this a good chance to challenge and reach a double score record?"

"Ugu…I'm fine with that."

Ayu pointed at the doll-grabbing machine."

"Okay, let's play that, then."

"I'm sorry, I have to go now."

"What's the matter?"

"Well, I just remembered that I have something I'm looking for."

"Speaking of which, it's evening now."

With Shiori's reminder, I looked at the clock at the service counter.

"Then we should leave too."

It was about time we returned home.

"So, see you."

Ayu parted ways with us at the small shop where we met.

I waved my hand to the Ayu who was about to run off, "Remember, even if you're hungry, don't eat and drink without paying."

"Ugu...I've got into good terms with the taiyaki old man."

Turning around for a short reply, Ayu ran off.

Shiori and I stood together, seeing those pair of dancing wings off.



The sun was reaching the horizon, long shadows casted on the streets.

"Ayu-chan looks healthy."

"Because that's the only good thing about her."

"...I'm a bit envious."

With her back facing the setting sun, Shiori looked at the moon crawling over the lower part of the sky.

"You're going to become healthy soon, aren't you?"

I stole a look at her face.

"Yes."

She threw a glance at me and smiled.

After a short walk, somewhere close to the exit of shopping district, we went down our own paths home.

"Today was enjoyable."

“Yes, but…”

I murmured almost in an inaudible voice.

“I hope next time it’ll only be you and me.”

“Yuichi-senpai…”

Shiori looked embarrassed and surprised.

“But it’s not because I hate Ayu.”

“I’m happy.”

The last drop of the setting sun fell on Shiori’s raised face, dying it with a beautiful colour.

“You didn’t want to call it a date, so I was worried whether it was boring to be with me.”

“…”

That was why she invited Ayu.

Again I felt that behind her thoughtless smile there were different sorts of feelings and emotions.

“I’m sorry.”

Following the natural course of action, I touched her face, feelings its coldness, feelings its softness.

“Let’s have a real date next time, Shiori.”

Chapter 3 - Happy Days

Musical notes flowed into the court.

It was a slow yet articulated melody.

“It’s from the hall, I think.”

Shiori looked at the side building between the school buildings.

“Yeah.”

I also turned to that building.

I didn’t know the details, but a famous man built this classical hall, and it had been the only building remaining here after the re-installment of the new school buildings several years ago.

“Balls are being held there recently. They’re practising, I guess.”

“Oh, yeah. I saw tables and table clothes being moved inside. They should be materials for the ball.”

“Seems so. I don’t really have much interest in balls anyway.”

“Because you’re a transfer student, Yuichi-senpai.”

“I think it’ll be the same even if I’m not.”

The ball is free to join, but it’s a scheduled event in school. Nayuki told me before. Still, lofty words like *balls* felt far from me.

“I want to join the ball. My sister told me last year that it was great.”

“Did your sister join the ball herself?”

I continued, carefully avoiding from mentioning her sister’s name.

“No,” Shiori said, shaking her head.

“She only had a glimpse. The boys wear evening suits, and girls beautiful gowns. The chandelier on the ceiling twinkles. It’s like a dreamy world.”

Shiori said, indulgingly, as if she saw it with her own eyes.

“So why don’t you join the ball?”

“Oh...”

My question caught her back from her fantasies. She lowered her head in embarrassment.

“I-I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Evening gowns don’t suit me.”

Shiori fingered around her cape, looking down at her fingers.

Should I tell her that evening gowns do suit her?

But I could feel that Shiori could smell flat out my flattering intention.

“Well, maybe your height and breast size don’t quite fit an evening gown.”

I pretended to make a joke.

“Why do you have to state those things I’m sensitive of?”

Shiori moved her eyes to me.

“Do you mind?”

“...a little, yes.”

Shiori’s face reddened to the question. Her pale lips contracted; when it opened again, she would speak her usual phrase.

“I hate people who say things like that the most.”

Look, I said so.

“Yuichi-senpai, please don’t laugh!”

“Sorry. I now know you also have normal girly troubles.”

“Of course.”

Shiori pushed a bit her small chest, which seemed to be the roots of her anxiety.

“Hey, you still have next year and the year after. Maybe you’ll grow taller, and your breast bigger. Then you can join the ball with good reason.”

“Next year...”

“Yeah. Next year. Height aside, won’t it trouble you if a miracle doesn’t happen to your breasts?”

“Miracle.”

“Shiori.”

I thought she was still angry, but with a closer look, I saw she showed a face of looking someplace far away, a face she hadn’t shown for some time.

It was a face that depressed me.

“Shiori.”

I called to her again, placing my hand on her cape, for if I didn’t, I was afraid she would just vanish off to some place. It seemed I had forgotten this feeling I once had.

“Sorry.”

Nevertheless, Shiori just reverted to her usual smile.

The music had gradually left us.

“Lunch break is almost over.”

Shiori looked at the school hung in the centre of the south-wing school building. Usually, she would never look at the clock before the ending bell.

“...so, see you tomorrow.”

That was all I could say. After that, Shiori smiled, gave a bow, and left.

We didn’t promise every single day to meet the following day. Besides, I didn’t ask her about her sister, so she shouldn’t be bothered by this. Her smile, before she left me, was the same as ever.

Still, it disturbed me that she didn’t say ‘see you tomorrow’.

Tomorrow? You would come tomorrow, right, Shiori?

Facing her back, I wished my strong feelings would be sent to her.

The following day, listening to the melody from the hall, I spent my lunch break in the court by myself.

It was the cold. Her cold worsened because she went out every day. *If I had disciplined myself to tell her to go home, things wouldn't have taken this turn*, I told myself.

There was something about her weird behaviour yesterday, but even if I recollect our conversations, I couldn't find any problems within.

When the ending bell rang, I shivered in the penetrating cold, walking back from the court to the corridor. There I saw a girl I hadn't seen before.

The ribbon on her uniform was green, so she was a junior.

I didn't know what she was doing, since this corridor only leads to the court, and I decided to pass through her, having no interest in striking a conversation with her.

"...Um."

But the girl called for me instead.

"I have rubbed off the dirt before coming in."

"I'm not a cleaning committee member."

"So you're a volunteer."

"No."

The girl looked helpless, so I decided to wait silently for her to proceed.

She then gathered her thoughts and spoke, "...well, are you the person who always stay with Misaka-san in the court?"

"Misaka...you mean Shiori?"

"Sorry, I'm not sure of her name...I have only spoken once to her."

"If you're talking about the girl who wears casual clothes and stays with me, that's Shiori."

"Okay, right."

"Hey, could you possibly be a discipline committee member? Shiori has a reason for wearing casual clothes."

"Why are you always trying to make me a committee member?"

The girl looked even more helpless now. I furrowed my brows and scratched my head.

"So, who are you?"

"I'm Misaka-san's classmate."

“If you’re her classmate, you should know well she’s on a sick leave because of a cold? She came to the court to do some recovery, I guess.”

“Yes…a cold?”

The girl cocked her head, making a doubtful voice.

“Isn’t it a cold?”

Shiori did say it was a cold, or perhaps a common flu. But it didn’t really matter which it was.

“I don’t know the reason for Misaka-san’s absence…but…”

She must have been scared by being looked at by a senior, staring at the floor, loss for words. I tried to use a gentle tone.

“If you don’t mind, could you tell me what you know?”

“…all I know is that ever since Misaka-san came to the opening ceremony of the first semester, she hadn’t come to school any more.”

…

Determined that she had a cold, I was struck speechless.

“On the first day of school, the person who talked to me because I was too nervous to talk with anyone was Misaka-san. She was slim, and was pretty when she smiled. I thought it would be great if she could be my first friend.”

My heart was throbbing, noisy as hell.

I suppressed the premonitions surfacing my heart.

“Even the teacher remained silent about Misaka-san’s absence. But I was worried…later, when I saw her through the window by chance, I thought it was a dream. But when she came every time at the lunch break, I…”

“You want to ask what it’s all about? Shiori being with me and stuff.”

The girl nodded.

“Is she really having a cold?”

“That’s what she says.”

“…”

I couldn’t discomfort this gentle girl worried about Shiori. I assured her with a smile, “Anyway, Shiori looks energetic now. I’m sure she’ll be back to school soon.”

“…I guess so.”

“Thanks…though it might seem weird for me to say this, I’ll tell her next time I see her that she has a friend worried about her.”

“Thank you.”

The girl smiled covertly.

“Please tell her I’ll be waiting to meet her at the classroom.”

“I’ll be sure to do that.”

Giving a bow similar to Shiori’s, the girl ran off along the corridor.

Let alone running, I was not even in the mood to return to my classroom.

Alone, and suppressing those rushing premonitions, I was at the verge of being crushed.

With unsteady steps, I went to the tuck shop that was about to close and bought an ice cream.

After that, I went to the court and ate that myself.

It wasn’t nasty, but it was cold, and no one would have a single idea why someone would eat ice cream here.

But I couldn’t stand my inner tension if I didn’t.

When lessons were over…

“Is Kaori here?!”

“Woah. Why didn’t you come to the lessons just now, Yuichi?”

I was sorry for ignoring Nayuki, but I was too drained to answer her. I directly headed to Kaori and said, “What’s Shiori’s condition, actually?”

“…what do you mean? Who’s Shiori?”

Kaori said, tensed.

“She’s your younger sister. Why do you have to pretend you don’t know her?”

Driven by impulse, I clutched her wrists and pressed on. “Hey, what are you doing?” Kitagawa asked, while Nayuki said in a bit of fear, “Don’t be so loud, Yuichi.”

“Didn’t I tell you before I didn’t have a sister?”

Still, Kaori’s face was stiff.

I glared her, staying still; she didn’t move her eyes away from me either.

“Kaori…”

Nayuki pulled Kaori’s sleeves.

“It’s fine. Nayuki, you have club activities today, right? It’s time you go.”

Kaori smiled to Nayuki as usual, and also thought of something to tell to Kitagwa, “Don’t you have a part-time job today? You’ll be late if you don’t hurry.”

Nayuki and Kitagawa knew well that she wanted them to leave.

“Okay, I’ll go.”

“Please don’t fight.”

The two of them turned around and left the classroom.

Kaori and I were the only ones left in the classroom. Other classmates had already gone to their respective clubs or returned home.

The classroom was silent and still.

Kaori suddenly stood from her seat and looked down from the window. She was standing beside my seat, where I could look at Shiori’s usual position and the bench we sat on.

Maintaining a suitable distance from her, I looked through the windows like her.

There was no one at the court. Refraining from looking at me, Kaori said, “Even though I don’t have a sister…”

“…”

“…can I ask you something?”

Kaori’s tone was lifeless.

“What?”

“Aizawa-kun, do you like that girl you call Shiori?”

“…”

Kaori still looked only at the court, as if there was someone she was looking for there.

“…perhaps.”

I told her honestly.

“I believe that’s a yes.”

Perhaps it began from the day we first met. When I saw the petite girl with snow on her head, at a loss, it turned this interesting encounter into a heart-stirring instant.

When I saw her at the court, I thought it was a dream, for she was a dreamy, illusory young girl.

Eventually, this girl entered my heart as a formed body named Shiori.

Now, her single day’s absence had made me lost my usual cool, my heart wild and worried.

“…I see.”

Kaori leaned on the glass with her forehead, her beautiful wavy hair fluttering on her shoulders.

“I don’t know Shiori think of me, though.”

"..."

"So I'm worried about her. Not only her condition, but also because she was sadly hated by her 'loving sister'."

Kaori's shoulders twitched, but she still kept her eyes away from me.

"That's all I want to say. It matters nothing to you if you don't have a sister. I'm sorry for making you talk with me on something that has nothing to do with you."

And thus I left the classroom, leaving her alone.

I spoke as though I had some great reason, but if Shiori still didn't come to the court tomorrow, I wouldn't know what to do after that.

The following day, the school was boisterous since the morning.

The usual desolate hall was now decorated beautifully and glamorously to make its occasional appearance remarkable. Many students walked by with heavy suitcases. Those must be the clothes they would be changing into for the afternoon ball.

Those that wouldn't join the ball were excited to look forward to the half day off because of the activities.

"Forget it. If no one is listening, there is no reason to continue. Let's end here."

Sighing, the teacher closed the textbook. And thus we had free time to our disposal.

Everyone was engaged in time-killing conversations: "The student council would pull off a good ball this year", "This is a good chance to look at well-dressed boys and girls," and the like, while I was resting my chin on my hands sullenly.

"Yuichi, you're not joining the ball, right?" Nayuki invited me to a conversation, "I'm not going either, and since I don't have club activities today, why don't we go to the shopping district together?"

I know a shop that sells delicious strawberry parfait, Nayuki said, smiling.

"No...Not today."

"What a pity."

"Let me go with you, Nayuki."

Kaori patted Nayuki's shoulder.

"Kaori, aren't you joining the ball?"

Kitagawa asked, holding a bag, seemingly prepared to change his clothes.

"Why am I going? Oh, you're going, Kitagawa. Have fun."

"Mm, okay."

Kitagawa looked lonely.

“Yuichi…”

Kaori said flatly at Nayuki to discourage her from worry, “Let those sullen people run off to places like the court and hide themselves.”

“Kaori, did you really not have a quarrel with Yuichi?”

“No, we didn’t.”

I answered in Kaori’s place and stood up. It was discomforting for both of us if I stayed this cheerful place.

As what Kaori had said, I decided to hide myself at the court.

I still didn’t see Shiori the day after that day.

Perhaps she would never come. If that was the case, I could still indulge in the short memories I had. With that in mind, I opened the steel door to the court.

And…

“You’re late, Yuichi-senpai.”

For a moment I thought it was an illusion, but the girl at the corner of the court was looking at me with a smile. She hadn’t vanished.

“Shiori…”

I swallowed the trembling voice that would embarrass myself. On my way, I tripped several times on the snow before staggering and running to the young girl.

“I was absent for two days, so I don’t really have the right to reprimand someone for being late, I think.”

“What happened in these two days?”

“I didn’t feel really good.”

“Is it better now?”

“I haven’t fully recovered yet…”

But I came because I want to see you, Yuichi-senpai.

I imagined her reason for coming and let myself swim in joy.

Unfortunately, Shiori might have known Kaori was around, so she went through all the trouble to let me come here and see her.

Still, I would never know, and nothing was more important than seeing Shiori right now.

“The ball is about to start after all those preparations.”

Shiori looked at the hall, the origin of flowing musical notes in the court.



“Did you come for the ball, Shiori?”

“How could that be possible?” Shiori said, spreading her cape that had always been covering her.

“I can’t make it with this outfit.”

“Well, why don’t we find another place?”

I had planned to date her again.

“A date?”

Shiori replied immediately.

“…yeah, I want to date you.”

I answered, feeling myself blushing. On Shiori’s face was a smile like a small flower blooming.

“Let me bring you somewhere I know, Yuichi-senpai.”

What a miracle.

I thought, looking at Shiori’s small face.

When I couldn’t see her, days seem like years to me while I single-mindedly thought of her. When I could, that feeling would vanish, replaced by a feeling that I had been with her for a long time. Her real reason for absence, things about Kaori, and all other worries would vanish into the depths of my heart.

“Yuichi-senpai, do you still remember this place?”

Trees aligned on both sides of the shaded path.

“I remember Ayu escaped and came here to eat her stolen food.”

Shiori laughed at my bitter remark on Ayu.

“Then it’s where I first met you, right?”

“Yes.”

It was here, Shiori said, gently putting her hand on a tree in the middle of the road.

“Yuichi-senpai, do you remember what happened then?”

“Most of it.”

I wasn't sure of what I had been doing, but I could recall what happened to Shiori in every detail.

"I remember all of them. I remember everything you and Ayu-chan said."

"You have a good memory."

She smiled.

"Because they truly are precious memories."

"They don't span enough time to be called memories."

"Memories have no relation to the length of time."

The wind blew, Shiori's hair fluttered.

"I think…it depends on how important that instant is to that person…and how significant it is…"

She said, hitting the crux of the matter, without even giving in much thought.

"Was it really that important?"

Ayu suddenly knocked on a roadside tree that made snow fall on Shiori's head—I couldn't understand how this had to do with her profound words.

"Because you and Ayu-chan were the real deal."

"Really?"

"When I got back home that day, I couldn't stop laughing."

Shiori left the tree and continued walking.

I immediately followed behind. From my point of view, it was only teasing Ayu, but if it occurred precious to Shiori, let her think that way.

"Here."

Shiori turned around and spread her arms, her cape fluttering like a small cloak.

"So there's such a place around…"

This place was a wide park surrounded by trees.

Like a round coliseum, there were stairs leading to the lower middle area. It was a plaza with a large stone-made fountain, streaks of water flowing and dancing like mist.

White snow imprinted itself: on the branches, on the rocks of the fountain, and on the ground.

"This is the place I like the most. I found it while looking for places to draw still life."

The scenery was certainly beautiful and illusory, suitable for drawing still life.

With light footsteps, Shiori ran down the stairs to the plaza.

I followed her slowly. When I had come to the plaza, I felt as if standing in the middle of a snow-carved stadium. There was, however, no audience.

“This is great. It’s like we have rent this place.”

“Because today’s not a holiday. We can even play baseball here.”

I gathered the snow on the ground, mashed it into a ball, and lightly threw it.

Looking at the parabolic arc it drew, I said, “We can also have a snowball fight.”

Shiori followed suit and made a snowball.

“Do you want to play?”

Shiori kept on making more snowballs.

“But we don’t have a special reason to do so here…”

She made more snowballs. Snowman and snowballs should be games you didn’t want to play any longer if you had born and raised in this town. Shiori, on the other hand, made those snowballs with gusto as if this were her first time. She didn’t even seem to care about her hands that had become red from the snow.

“Can’t we play?”

Well, there wasn’t anything against playing. She was pretty loaded anyway. Heaving a sigh reluctantly, I held one snowball.

“Okay, let’s have a snow fight until our hands fall off.”

“Sure, yeah…?”

“We have to make more snowballs.”

“Do we have to stuff rocks inside?”

“Please don’t smile while you say those horrifying words.”

That would just glue my eyes on her hands.

“Okay, so the number of snowballs is even.”

“Aren’t those snowballs all made by me?”

“The one who goes first wins. Here it comes!”

“Woah! Cold!”

The snowball I threw hit her hand.

“Counter!”

“Revenge?”

Cold snow threw through the side of my face.

“Hey, you aim the face…phhuu…impressive!”

When I opened my mouth to speak, I ate some snow, which excited me.

“Woah, Yuichi-senpai, using tow hands are terrible!”

“You can even maintain your speech while you hit back the snow I threw at you?”

A person scoring 0 in whack-a-mole would definitely fail to beat her.

“It’s just a coincidence.”

That she may say, but she was throwing snowballs at me as quick as professionals made sushi in a sushi-go-around. Showing off the reflexes I developed from martial arts games, I evaded her attacks and found chances to throw some back at her.

As a result, although our hands didn’t fall off, we had a great time in the snow fight, and we didn’t stop until we were so tired we couldn’t even raise our hands.

“Phew…”

Worn off, I sat on the edge of the fountain.

“It's really tiring, eh?”

Shiori sat beside me, puffing white smoke. But there was no sweat on her.

I stretched my numb shoulders a little.

“But what the heck are we doing? Going to a park with no one around on a working afternoon, throwing snowballs at each other until our hands hurt.”

“Do you even have to ask?” Shiori adjusted her cape and said matter-of-factly. “We’re dating.”

“I see. We really are.”

It was a simple and good date so far.

Lifting her head, Shiori closed her eyes.

“The wind feels good.”

“Yeah.”

My body warmed from the snow fight, the winter wind felt good.

With her eyes shut, Shiori allowed the wind to embrace her.

Slowly, she opened her lips.

If I were to touch these lips, I may…

Grumble…

"Yuichi-senpai, are you hungry?"

"Yeah! I'm starving to death!"

As I cursed my stomach for giving such a clichéd response, I ranted.

"Speaking of which, we haven't even eaten lunch yet."

I nodded, with a bit of embarrassment.

"Because we came here directly after meeting at the court."

"Sometimes people pull carts there and sell stuff."

Shiori pointed to the direction from where we came.

"Will anyone still do business in this season? And it's not even a holiday."

"Perhaps, if we do a lot of good deeds every day."

"…okay. The shopping district is too far anyway."

I didn't have much confidence in my usual route, but it was fine to have a stroll around the park.

We had a little walk. Shortly after, we saw a big umbrella: we lucked out.

"See, I do a lot of good deeds."

Shiori turned around at me, smiling happily. Rather than ask her 'Is it a good deed for a patient to run out?' I instead flashed a smile back at her and took out my wallet.

"Welcome."

The lady with her hair dyed gold really matched the style of selling roadside stuff.

Frankfurt sausages, fried noodles, and okonomiyaki.

Juice, cola, and ice cream.

"I want cola and fried noodles. What about you, Shiori?"

"I want ice cream."

As expected.

"But Frankfurt sausages look good."

"I want vanilla-flavoured ice cream."

"Oh wait, isn't this okonomiyaki made Hiroshima-styled?"

"…"

"There are even eggs under its bottom."

"I hate you the most, Yuichi-senpai…"

"Haha."

"Have both of you decided?"

The lady had been opening and closing the box for the ice cream, and almost adding cream to the okonomiyaki before restraining herself to do so. The eyes hidden behind her golden hair glared at us directly.

"Yes. We want cola, fried noodles, and ice cream please! Oh, and since it's the winter we're talking about, we are going to have vanilla ice cream for sure, hahaha."

Trying to get away with a dry laugh, I paid swiftly and returned to the fountain with Shiori in a hurry.

"Phew."

The unexpected tension made me hungrier. Looking at Shiori who ate her seemingly delicious ice cream in this cold park, I quickly finished my high calorie fried noodles and cola.

"Here, have some vanilla ice cream for dessert."

Shiori held a spoon of ice cream at me.

"No. I've had enough vanilla."

"You've had?"

"…I've eaten it. When you're not around, I had them alone in the court."

"Was it good?"

I shook my head, "It's too cold when I eat it by myself."

"…"

"Besides, I enjoy looking at you eat rather than eating it myself."

"I don't know whether I should continue eating after you say that."

Shiori sucked on one end of the spoon, her head lowered, her face a bit red.

The water splashed in the fountain.

We had been here for a while, but this was the first time I heard this sound.

The wind blowing onto my body felt cold again.

The signs of evening came early in winter.

"The ball should be in its climax now."

Shiori placed her hands in front of her chest, holding her cape.

“I think it’s more fun having a snow fight with you than dancing in a dressed-up ball.”

“Really?”

“Do you think balls are better?”



I moved my legs to get closer to her.

“I...”

Shiori didn’t continue, but I wasn’t really aware.

She had finished her ice cream.

This short silence was soothing.

“Something sprang into my mind just now.”

Shiori lifted her head, as if suddenly remembering something.

“Isn’t the scene we are in now like those scenes we often see in soap operas?”

She spoke as if she was just a spectator.

“Do you enjoy soap operas, Shiori?”

“I actually watch all the soap operas that are aired.”

“Then, what scene is it like if it’s a soap opera?”

I pretended to adjust my sitting position and secretly get even closer to her.

“Well...”

I took the finger at her chin she used to think and moved it aside.

“Ah.”

I moved my face to her. She then closed her eyes. I placed my hands on her shoulders. Those were small, shockingly weak shoulders.

A sweet fragrance of vanilla.

In front of the fountain, our lips softly came together.

“Is this too cliché?”

“Let’s see...” Shiori looked down as if she was going to bury her body into her cape, “I don’t hate cliché episodes.”

“Shiori.”

Touched, I wanted to hold her shoulders. But since she stood up suddenly, I lost the chance and so my hand could only swap thin air.



“Because…don’t we wish we could at least see a happy ending in a story?”

Shiori said, but to whom I didn’t know.

“Because these stories are the happy endings humans wish for,” Shiori turned around, smiling with a hint of loneliness, “They feel wonderful.”

“Shiori…”

“That was my first kiss.”

Shiori gently stroked her lips with her tender fingers.

“I’m happy it was you who took it, Yuichi-senpai.”

After that, when I returned home, the paradoxical feelings of ecstasy and anxiety crashed my heart, as if they were about to explode, which didn’t fade even late at night.

I kissed Shiori.

I was elated.

It was even more delighting to hear Shiori said she was happy.

But the lonely face she held after that was the face I could sometimes see, the face looking far away.

The more I stirred her true feelings, and the more I see her smile, the more I couldn’t stand the other face she had.

Don’t we wish we could at least see a happy ending in a story?

So what she meant was that happy endings only occur in stories? Then even the relationship she had with me…

“Wuagh…”

I held my head. I was really going to explode after five seconds. Before that happened, Nayuki called me from the other side of the door.

“Are you free now, Yuichi?”

“What’s up?”

“There’s a phone call for you…from Kaori.”

"…"

Slowly, I lifted the face buried in the pillow.

"Are you going to pick it up?"

"Yeah."

I was well aware of what was going to happen.

This phone call was the only switch to prevent myself from exploding.

Or perhaps, this switch could just straight off blow me into pieces.

Chapter 4 - Confession

Nayuki and Akiko didn't ask me why I was going out late.

"It's snowing now. Beware of the cars, okay?"

"Wear something warm. You don't want to catch a cold."

All they said were reminders for my care.

Curling the scarf over the collar of my jacket, I went to school where Kaori was waiting.

Kaori didn't say anything happened in the phone. She said with her usual calm tone, "Can you come out for a moment?"

I agreed without asking why.

The street lamps shone on the falling snowflakes.

In this quiet night, my footsteps were particularly loud.

The air was cold, so cold that my I couldn't feel blood flowing to the back of my feet and my nose, making them numb. I walked without hesitation. I knew very clear what Kaori was planning to say. For this, I could forget the cold. I would bet my life to forget it.

Kaori was standing in front of the closed school gate.

She was alone, wearing her uniform, without an umbrella. She was almost being right below the shower of the street lamp. She was standing there, still, paying no heed to the snow fallen on her shoulders and her hair.

"Here I am."

"…too slow."

"Is this the first thing when you call someone out?"

I smiled wryly, entering the shower of light Kaori was in.

"What's up?"

Kaori didn't respond.

"...Is it about Shiori?"

I asked, thinking it the correct guess. Suddenly Kaori spread the white piece of paper on her hand.

"Look."

The white paper looked like a child's drawing, a portrait, probably. Drawn there was a girl with long hair and big eyes.

"This is me."

Kaori glared at the girl in the drawing.

"This is what my sister gave me on my birthday. It was the first present I received from her."

"Your sister..."

"Yes. My only sister."

A pale tone.

Still, Kaori would say she had a sister now, contrary to what she had said. The word *sister* she said and the meaning it carried was completely opposed between then and now.

"...My sister was born with a weak body."

Kaori said, as if reciting a story.

"When I got this drawing, she was already in hospital. *I'm sorry. I couldn't buy anything for you,* she said, handing this to me."

While I hear her words, I looked at the drawing like she did.

Then on the other end of the drawing paper, I could see two young girls.

In the children's ward decorated by origami, a girl in pajamas was on a bed facing the drawing board.

Seeing that scene was another girl.

"Before that, this weak child caught most of the love from her parents. To tell the truth, I am bit jealous. But even when this child was in pain, she would still crawl up from her bed. She said she had to make it to her sister's birthday...and she then smiled."

The other girl with a resistant look was caught by the smile of the drawing girl, and soon her expression pacified.

After that, she received the drawing that was difficulty made.

"Back then, it was my first time that I was so happy I cried," Kaori continued.

The two sisters who had got on better terms, spent all the time they could have to be together, to share their feelings. The older sister told the younger one who couldn't go to school all the interesting things about school and lessons. The younger sister told the older one the books she read when she was alone, and how she had taken them to be the protagonists of stories, showing her the illustrated stories she created.

"Whenever the visiting time ended, and I had to go home, I would almost tear up from leaving her."

Kaori's lips showed a hint of smile.

"She always comforted me…when in realty, she was the one who was left alone, who should experience more loneliness and pain."

Yet her sound was beginning to tremble.

"We still say, though, that she had to get better one day. We would promise each other for that day to come, to stay together forever."

"…"

Under this air-freezing snow, I just stood there listening to Kaori's words.

"My sister got in and out of the hospital again and again. When she hit the age to go to school, she insisted, despite her parents' disagreement, that she had to wear the same uniform as I did no matter what—this was the first time she went against her parents' words."

A dark red one piece, a white cape, and a big ribbon near the chest to indicate the year. Many girls run to apply for this school just to wear this classically designed uniform.

"She wore the same uniform as I, went to the same school as I, and ate lunch with me. She was always looking forward to these insignificant things."

As if she had to protect the portrait from the snow, Kaori held it to her chest.

"But she…"

"She only went to school once, am I right?"

Kaori nodded.

"I thought her condition would get better and continue her studies. But I was wrong. My parents and the doctor knew letting her go to school and wear a uniform was nothing but consolation."

"Consolation…"

Silence followed. Then all of a sudden Kaori looked up at me.

"Aizawa-kun, you once told me you liked that child, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Do you still like her now?"

"I will still like her."

"...even if she disappears later?"

Startled, I became unable to breathe.

"What do you mean?"

I knew the most important moment had finally come.

"I mean what I said."

"..."

"The doctor said she probably won't make it to her next birthday."

Isn't the scene we are in now like those scenes we often see in soap operas?

Shiori's catchphrase streamed into my mind the moment I heard Kaori said that.

The declaration of parting had to come, and soon.

Some describe this moment to be matter melting away from our feet, and some to be darkness upon our eyes.

I had neither of these feelings.

Only my heart thumped, and a odd thought surfacing on the corner of my mind: this really is a scene in a soap opera; it really exists.

Then I said, according to the lines in a soap opera.

"When's Shiori's birthday?"

How long could Shiori live?

"The first day next month."

"Wha..."

She had only a week left.

When I thought of the short time she had, I can only put on an empty smile.

Even when she had been smiling, in such joy?

She was so weak...and her skin so white it seemed it melted into the snow, yet she was so energetic to eat ice cream and play snowball fights with me.

Even in her situation, she promised to make a snowman and dreamed of joining the ball next year. Will all of these things never come true? Is this why she would sometimes look afar? Is she looking for the future she doesn't have?

"Does Shiori know this?"

Kaori nodded.

“I told her.”

“Why did you?”

“Because she asked me. Why…why am I reluctant to face her nowadays?”

“…”

Kaori eavesdropped it from a conversation between her parents.

“I…”

Her voice would tremble at times, but she had always spoken with a clear tone. But now, she changed.

Her brows furrowed, she bit her trembling lips and let go. Biting and letting go, the waver in her heart was dictated.

“Since then, I have fled from that child. Because that child…that child was smiling to me despite knowing her own fate.”

Glistening tears came to her eyes. As if her feeling were shooting from her, she almost fell down. I supported her by the shoulder. She leaned on me, speaking and sobbing.

“If she cried, if she hated me, I would have felt better. Whenever she smiles, I will think of the day when I couldn’t see her smile, and it terrifies me. The more I love her, the more depressed I become.”

Even when Shiori knew her condition, she still folded and ironed her uniform, and hung it on the wall every day.

“I wish I could wear this uniform like you sooner.”

She kept smiling to Kaori. *Sure,* Kaori wanted to answer, yet she couldn’t.

“If I had to experience the pain of losing her…it would have been better if I…”

Kaori seemed to have lost all the strength in her speech.

“…if I hadn't had a sister in the first place…”

After that, Kaori fell on the snow ground, holding her sister’s drawing, continuing her sobs in silence.

I said nothing, letting her lean on my chest.

Her love makes the fate of parting terrifying.

Kaori’s feeling was the same as mine.

We allowed snowflakes to stack on our shoulders. Standing under the street lamps, we stood still.

Shards of snow carried by the wind were assailing us.

I didn't know who went first, but we had started heading to our respective homes.

Kaori, who had regained her speech, said then, "That child's condition is pretty good recently. She had been getting weaker by the day, but lately her condition is stable."

Even the doctors didn't want to believe it.



"Perhaps it's because of you, Aizawa-kun."

"...I did nothing."

My ignorance matches stupidity, and all I did was fooling around with Shiori.

Kaori shook her head and smiled gently, "So maybe she can live through her birthday. Still, it doesn't change the fact she's going to be gone one day."

With that said, her eyes returned sombre.

And before we part and leave, Kaori looked at me and asked, "For what reason was the child born?"

Unable to answer her, I could only leave with our backs facing each other.

The second day, Kaori was absent at school.

"How rare," Nayuki said.

Kitagawa too, made a response. His chin resting on his hands, he looked at Kaori's empty seat with a bored look.

"It might be a cold or whatnot."

"Kaori would still come to school if it's a cold. She said she enjoyed school more than being at home."

"Nayuki."

"Yes?"

Do you know what Kaori's troubles are? Do you know what she is thinking behind her usual cold face?

Of course, I didn't ask her. Even if I did, nothing would have changed.

"Why don't we go to the cafeteria today for lunch?"

"What a chance. Don't you have to go to that girl today?"

“Why did you know?!”

I couldn’t let out an exclamation of surprise. Everyone in the class turned their heads to me.

“Are you even trying to pretend dumb? Anyone who sees the court through this window would know,” Kitagawa said, with a teasing face.

“My mistake.”

“Aizawa, you’re so slow sometimes.”

“We’ll support you from beside, Yuichi.”

“...”

If they said this to me yesterday, this would probably be an interesting topic to kill boredom.

But now it nothing but an extension of lamentation.

“Is anything wrong? The weather is fine today.”

“I don’t have any courage to go to the court now,” I said.

“Are there any wild dogs there?” Kitagawa prompted.

“Where do they come from?”

“There was one before that caused big trouble for the school for a while.”

I don’t care if it’s dogs, I said and went to the cafeteria.

Nayuki and Kitagawa followed me.

Students filled the busy cafeteria. There were a lot of meals to choose from. Kitagawa had a Chinese rice set, Nayuki set A, and the two of them went to seize seats holding their plates.

“We’re going to have exams next time. Bad luck.”

“Can Kaori help us?”

We had an everyday conversation in the lunch break. I had almost forgotten there was such a time in the day.

Does Shiori know that I met Kaori yesterday?

Whether she knew it or not, she wouldn’t speak a thing about it. If I still went to the court today, she would give me an embarrassed smile and gently say, “You’re late, Yuichi-senpai” and the like.

Mere imagination almost broke the dam of my tears.

For what reason was the child born?

I could still see Kaori’s sorrowful look behind Shiori’s smile. I was regretting that I couldn’t notice the truth, and angry at my inability to take measures. There was no plan I could think of.

I couldn’t go to the court.

“Won’t you eat, Yuichi?”

Nayuki pried at my face worryingly.

“I want to eat ice cream…”

I wanted to meet Shiori., but now I couldn’t regulate my emotions.

“I’ll buy it for you, then.”

“You don’t have to.”

“What are you…?”

Kitagawa, sitting on the other side, heaved a sigh. I rose to my feet abruptly.

“I’m sorry. I’m skipping the afternoon lessons.”

“What?”

I left Nayuki and Kitagawa who were startled, and staggered out of the cafeteria.

I then left school without taking my schoolbag. I didn’t want them to see me dejected in humiliation.

I wandered to the shopping district.

Uh, uh, uh?

The moles beaten black and blue were crying.

Shiori, I have avenged for you. Now is the time to get a high score to return the favour. So what? I thought, but there was nothing I could do. Again I grasped the hammer for hitting the moles.

At this moment.

“You sure are working hard, Yuichi-kun.”

In a corner of the field of my vision were flapping wings.

“When did you come?”

“Just now.”

Speaking of which, I did start to smell the sweet scent of taiyaki.

“Do you want some, Yuichi-kun?”

Ayu took a taiyaki from the brown bag.

Just when I decided to say I didn’t have any appetite, the smoke rising from the taiyaki captivated me. Well, I hadn’t really eaten anything since morning.

“Thanks.”

I took one and had a bite.

“Woah, hot!”

“Because it’s just out of the oven.”

“You have to tell me beforehand. My tongue almost got burnt.”

“Good. Great I haven’t had one yet.”

Thump.

“Ugu…I’m not a mole!”

Hit by the gaming hammer, Ayu pressed her head with her gloved hand.

“I’m testing your reflexes,” I said on a whim, while having big bites on the taiyaki. It wasn’t anything I like to eat, but eating sweet things at this moment was delicious. The sugar replenished my deprived energy and stamina.

“By the way, what are you doing here?”

“I’m looking for something.”

“Looking for something? Didn’t you say something similar before?”

“Yeah. But I haven’t found it yet.”

Ayu looked serious.

“I see.”

I put down the hammer and packed the coins back to my wallet.

“Let’s look for it together.”

“Are you fine with that?”

We left the arcade and moved along the streets.

“Are you trying to find a shop with loose security to steal food and drinks?”

“Ugu…no!”

“Then what are you looking for?”

Ayu’s face reddened.

“Well, it’s something…I dropped.”

“Your wallet? Is that why you’re stealing food?” I asked, “Am I wrong?”

She shook her head energetically, the wings on her bag shaking along.

"It's something very important. Something very important to me..."

Ayu stopped talking abruptly.

"What's that important thing?" I pursued, "Hey!"

How can we look for it if you don't know what it is!

"B-But I'll remember when I see it, because it's very important."

Ayu looked even more serious.

Okay, as you say, I heaved a sigh.

I also had something I didn't know what it was but that I lost.

It was the memories I had the last time I came to this town, in the winter seven years ago.

The recent days I had spent with Shiori were so pleasant that I had already forgotten about this.

"Then let's have a walk where you usually go."

I walked with Ayu around dessert shops, pasty shops, and cake shops.

"Ah!"

"Did you find it?"

"How come there are so many kinds of pasty nowadays!"

"Go home, now!"

"I'm joking."

"I'm telling you. The shops you frequent only sell food."

"Ugu...none of your business."

Saying all we wanted, Ayu and I laughed.

This could count as insincerity to Shiori.

Anyway, I laughed with Ayu, as if I had forgotten about Shiori.

I felt only laughter could save hearts that had sunk to the deepest levels.

When I laugh with Ayu naively and thoughtlessly, I could solve Shiori's sickness and our imminent separation with laugher. It sounded reckless, but it was.

So I...

"Yuichi-kun?"

Ayu looked up with surprise at me, who was suddenly standing there without moving.

"…Ayu, I…"

I understood now. That was why Shiori just kept her smile. That was why I wasn't useless to be at her side, knowing nothing of her condition. Shiori wasn't just pretending or forcing to smile.

"I thought of something important, so, well…"

Even if I return now, Shiori wouldn't be there. Still, the only thing in my heart was to see her. I couldn't stand it if I don't.

Ayu showed a moment of loneliness, but soon she nodded with a smile.

"Okay, I understand. I'll go find my important thing, while you go find yours."

"Next time we meet, I'll show you what it is."

"Sure…"

Ayu waved me goodbye with her glove. When I ran through the shop selling kid stuff and left the shopping district, I looked back to have a look at Ayu. She was standing there alone, against the flow of people in the shopping district. I waved at her.

Thank you, Ayu. It was great to see you here today.

No students were in the school.

Evening had come, and Nayuki said there were exams, so most clubs were naturally suspended.

I walked straight to the court. Of course, no one was there.

But…

On the snow ground was a single pair of intermittent footprints

The footprints lead to the door to the school building. They were female, small footprints. I chased them. Opening the door to the interiors, the footprints carried damp air, becoming less obvious. But they were still there, and they were not long left. Even if they were gone, I still had a hunch of where the one who left it had gone.

I climbed the stairs.

It was the junior's classroom on the third floor, the classroom where Shiori originally had to go to. I didn't know which one it was, so I went through one by one. Their doors were opened, and no one was inside. But there was one door closed. It was the one right below the classroom I was in. I gently opened the door.

Wearing a cape and casual clothes, a girl was sitting almost in the centre of the classroom.

"I'm found."

The girl—Shiori—turned around as if she knew it was I, and slowly smiled at me.

"I thought no one would be around at this time. Seems right."

"..."

I couldn't say anything. I just approached her.

"This seat is originally mine."

Stuff was messily thrown in the table of the seat. It looked by no means a girl's.

"Of course, now it isn't."

Shiori caressed the table.

"This seat is still the seat I sat on the first day of school, this table still the one I used the first day, imbued with important memories. I talked with the girl sitting in front."

"...yes."

"That girl seemed very nervous by herself. I said I was by myself too, so we're the same. Then, the girl was delighted."

"That girl seems to care about you, Shiori."

"Ah?!"

I told Shiori, who was surprised, how I met the girl in the corridor.

"It that what happened? I see."

Shiori held a corner of her cape, lowering her head in a bit of embarrassment.

"I'm sorry for what I did today, Shiori. I..."

Smiling, Shiori shook her head at me, who was about to continue.

It's fine. I know how you feel, Yuichi-senpai.

Her eyes told me so.

"Where is your seat, Yuichi-senpai?"

Shiori lightly stood up from 'her seat' and asked. I walked to the second seat from the back beside the window and pointed at it.

"So this is your seat."

Shiori walked to where I was, sat down, and looked through the window.

"So this is the scene you see everyday, Yuichi-senpai..."

"This is the third floor, so it's a bit different."

"It's fine."

Shiori smiled and looked at the sky.

"Because this sky is the same sky you see."

The winter sky dyed orange. We both looked beyond the window at the clouds that were slowly changing their shapes.

We remained silent. I enjoyed talking with her, but it was also great to spend time quietly viewing the same scene.

It would be better if time just stopped flowing.

But time was like those clouds, flowing seamlessly.

"Have you known those things about me…from my sister?"

With her usual calm tone, Shiori commenced.

"…Yeah."

They talked similar when they went into serious topics, probably because they were sisters for this matter.

"It isn't any cold at all, is it?"

Shiori nodded.

"I'm sorry for lying to you, Yuichi-senpai."

"…"

"It's actually a much more serious illness. It won't get cured even with a lot of medicine or injections."

"What sort of illness is it?"

"…I don't remember."

Shiori looked at me with a sorrowful smile.

"It has a complicated name, but even if I know, there's nothing I can change."

So its name is meaningless, she said, still remaining her smile.

Even when Kaori, her sister, were in tears.

"I also have another thing to apologise."

Shiori looked straight at me. Her clear pale iris captivated me on the first day we met, as if it was sucking me in.

"I love you, Yuichi-senpai."

"Shiori…"

"Perhaps I love you more than anyone else."

But... she said, her small lips slightly trembling.

“I planned not to love anyone. I knew...it would only bring sadness, yet I couldn’t help.”

She directed her gaze below the window.

“Today as well. I knew probably I wouldn’t see you again yet I ran there. I knew I just have to give up, yet I waited, and waited.”

I embraced her tightly; her body was as frail as glass, but very warm. Shiori had truly lived her life as hard as she could.

“I’m dumb.”

Shiori stayed in my arms, not moving an inch.

“I’m so dumb that my sister hates me.”

I shook my head, stroking her dry and fresh hair.

“I’m sorry. How bothersome I may be, I still love you, Yuichi-senpai.”



I held her hand and let it go behind my back.

“I also love you, Shiori.”

“...”

“So even if you tell me I’m bothersome, I’ll still stay beside you, forever.”

“Yuichi-senpai...”

Shiori lifted her head, still smiling quietly.

“It’s like a soap opera.”

“Yeah.”

It didn’t matter, because this was a happy scene. It was scene that didn’t need any tears.

For what reason was the child born?

I answered Kaori’s question.

She was born for the same reason as us. The length of one’s life didn’t matter.

Shiori was born to experience happiness.

Chapter 5 - Dreamy Days

“Good morning, Yuichi.”

The morning started as usual.

“Good morning.”

Having greeted Akiko, I went to the dining table for breakfast.

Beside me, Nayuki was in total slumber: only her hands moved by themselves, spreading jam on her toast.

“…Ku?”

“Stop sleeping.”

I only hit her softly on the head, but she fell all the way on the table.

“If you sleep here, the jam would stick to your hair.”

“No problem…I love jam.”

After our meaningless conversation, Nayuki snored again, “Kuing.”

“Let her sleep today, Yuichi.”

Akiko said gently while tying Nayuki’s hair.

“She was very worried you wouldn’t come back yesterday. So she had been waiting for you and didn’t go to sleep.”

“I see.”

Yesterday I had been staying with Shiori and returned after I sent Shiori home. It must have been very difficult for Nayuki who slept usually at nine. Speaking of which, my schoolbag I left at school was in my room when I came back. Nayuki must have brought it back.

“But she slept while waiting for you.”

Nayuki and Akiko who waited for me would never push their worries on me. They would always support me unnoticeably.

“I’ll call her up in a while. You can go to school first.”

It was already eight. *I’m off, then,* I said, and took my schoolbag.

“Take care.”

“I’m off.”

In gratitude to Akiko and Nayuki who treated me like a real family member, I left home.

It was a bright day I had long seen. The sun glimmered with light.

Ice stacked on two sides of the road. Through the bridge and two stations, I could see students in the uniform I had got accustomed to.

“Morning.”

“Yo.”

I waved to familiar people. I had already overcome the reluctance of coming to this town over these several weeks.

It was another morning.

Yet one thing was different.

“Good morning!”

Something bumped into me from behind. Turing around, I saw a girl standing there, smiling in embarrassment.

“Eh…sorry. I got all excited and bumped into you.”

A dark red one piece, a white cape, and a big green ribbon near the chest. Shiori wore this uniform with pride. It was so dazzling I had to squint my eyes.

“You came.”

“Yes, I came. I’ll start working hard today. I will!”

Shiori held her whole-new bag, walking along with me.

“I have a request, Yuichi-senpai.”

It was what Shiori said when we parted yesterday.

“One week will do. Please treat me like a normal girl.”

“One week…”

This should be equivalent to the time Shiori had left.

“Yes. In this week, I will go to school. I will study with others, I will eat lunch with others…I will go out with the person I like on the weekends…”

If I return too late, my parents would get angry, and my sister would pamper me.

Only for this short time, Shiori added.

“Only this week. Let me make this wish come true.”

Shiori’s eyes were dazzling when she thought of her dream. But she moved those eyes down and continued, “Only a week, though. For if it’s longer, it would only produce sorrowful memories, for me, and also for you, Yuichi-senpai.”

"…"

"A week later, the first of February, I will disappear from your world."

Disappear—When I heard this word from her mouth, I was still shocked.

"…Are there any other ways?"

Shiori kept silent.

"Really, are there really no other ways?"

It was probably a sad question to Sihori. But I couldn't restrain myself from not asking.

"Well, if a miracle happens, there may be a way, but…" Shiori added queitly with a smile, "It's called a miracle because it doesn't happen."

We could still dream even if a miracle doesn't happen.

So, for this week…

"Can you accept my request for this week, Yuichi-senpai?"

I agreed.

"Thank you," Shiori said happily, her eyes gleaming.

Shiori and I had to part at the entrance because we were in different grades.

"Can we have lunch together today?"

"I don't have anything to do anyway."

"Then let me wait at your class after the fourth lesson…"

Shiori stuttered, and corrected her saying.

"Well, let's meet at the cafeteria."

"That's good too."

There were people in Yuichi's classroom whom Shiori didn't know how to treat.

Even in this dreamy week, there was just something that couldn't be changed.

"Then I'm off."

"I'll be waiting for you at lunch," Shiori said, waving her hand, heading to the entrance for juniors.

I saw her small body off.

To be honest, I wasn't a mentally strong person.

So even I wouldn't know what I would become after this week.

Still, I wouldn't want Shiori to be alone now, and I didn't want to leave her.

Whether it be a dream or a soap opera she likes, I just hoped I could enjoy this time with her.

The lesson overran a bit, so I ran to the cafeteria.

She was already waiting there.

She stood beside the entrance on the wall, looking at the wave of people in surprise.

When she heard my call, she turned to me with a soothed expression.

"It's fine to sit down."

"It's my first time here, so I'm a bit nervous."

"Is there a seat?"

Shiori and I walked into the cafeteria. The cafeteria, spacious and with a good scenery, was popular in the winter. We looked around and found two seats opposite to each other.

"I'll go and buy something for you. What do you want, Shiori?"

"The same as you, Yuichi-senpia."

"...I'm going to get curry."

Shiori suddenly fell silent.

"Is there a problem?"

"Eh, well, nothing."

"Okay, take care of the seats."

I bought two sets of curry rice, one for Shiori and one for me.

Speaking of which, this was the first time I saw Shiori eating something other than ice cream.

With a bit of expectation, I settle the plate of curry rice before Shiori.

"It looks delicious."

Shiori took a spoon and stared at the curry seriously.

"The curry here is pretty traditional."

This was one of the recommendations by Kitagawa, who calls himself as the all-knowing master of the school cafeteria.

"You don't have to be so nervous though."

I quickly took a bite. "Thanks for the food," Shiori said, and ate a spoon of rice. Then she took another spoon of rice.

"It's nice."

"You're not even eating the curry!"

"I'm eating now."

Shiori sent a red pickled vegetable beside the rice into her mouth. Then she got another spoon of that pickled vegetable and ate it.

"Shiori..."

"It's some nice chewy curry."

"Are you then going to proceed into eating the shallot and say it's some nice sour curry?"

"I hate people who talk like that."

It was a rare to see Shiori show a helpless expression.

"If you can't eat curry, let's have something else."

"No. I can."

With a push, Shiori sent another spoon of curry in her mouth. Then she froze.

"..."

Her eyes gradually became wet, her nose becoming red. Even so, she managed to chunk it in, followed by huge amounts of water.

"Fu?"

"Shiori..."

"Sorry, actually, I'm terrible at hot stuff."

"This is just average spicy. So you can't eat curry, can you?"

"I've eaten some at home, but they're made for kids..."

It seemed to be those brands called prince curry or princesses curry.

"If you're bad at spicy stuff, what about wasabi?"

"I hate it when I see it."

"Mustard?"

"I hate it when I hear it."

"Tabasco sauce?"

"It's human's enemy!"

"Ice cream?"

"I love it."

Shiori's voice softened, and she continued with a smile, "Let's have some ice cream, shall we?"



I heaved a sigh and rose to my feet.

"I'm going to get it for you."

"Thank you…"

After several minutes, I was eating two servings of curry, while Shiori, sitting opposite to me, was only eating ice cream. The students passing by shot weird glances at us.

It didn't matter. Even if it was awkward to them, it was great for Shiori and me.

Because we were lovers.

"Say, Shiori."

Shiori looked distracted to my sudden call.

"…I'm sorry. I didn't hear you," she said, smiling, "but I think so too."

"Look."

This should be a lover's conversation, I guess. I ate my curry with confidence.

"Next time, I'll make packed lunch. I'll make yours too, Yuichi-senpai."

"I look forward to it."

"Okay!"

"Taste aside."

"I hate people who talk like that!"

I smiled happily at Shiori's tantrum.

During the afternoon lessons, when I had to change classrooms for the next lesson, I came across Shiori in the corridor.

"Yuichi-senpai."

Beside Shiori who was waving her hand energetically was a girl I seemed to have met before.

"Hey, I remember you're that cleaning committee member."

“No.”

“Discipline committee member?”

“I’m not.”

“So you’re…”

“Well, you kept insisting I’m a committee member, so I joined the library committee.”

“Congratulations.”

She exchanged glances with Shiori and both of them smiled. The girl who became a library committee member then said to me, “Just like you said, senpai, Misaka-san is back to school. I’m glad.”

“Mm…”

Only for a week, though.

Suddenly I felt I was being pulled from a dream to reality. But I thought, ‘What we’re having now is the true reality’, and suppressed that feeling.

“What’s wrong, Yuichi-senpai?” Shiori asked with her head tilted.

“Nothing.”

“Really?”

Shiori put her finger on her lips. She looked up at me with a kind of detective look.

“Really. Listen, the bell is ringing. We have to hurry.”

I softly pushed Shiori’s back. Shiori walked away with her friend, chatting happily about something.

I couldn’t sense from her any sad emotion that this situation could only last for these few days. I have to pull myself together too, *I made up my mind. Turning around, I happen to see Kaori at the corner of the corridor.*

Nayuki quickly came to her side, and the two continued walking.

Was Kaori waiting for Nayuki? Or was she looking at us?

The following day, I quickly finished lunch with Shiori and went to the court with her.

The person originally here was Shiori wearing her cape. Now it was Shiori in her uniform.

This small change was enough to create a refreshing feeling.

“Today I had an arts lesson.”

In Shiori’s hand was an aqua-blue sketchbook.

“And I remembered you wanted to have a look at my drawings.”

“Yeah.”

“If it’s fine with you, do you mind me writing a portrait of you, Yuichi-senpai? I have the tools needed with me.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll have to give my all, then,” Shiori said, opening her sketchbook.

She looked at me and the sketchbook seriously. Whoosh, whoosh, she swung her sketching pen.

“I feel a little embarrassed…”

When I wanted to scratch my cheeks…

“Please don’t move.”

Shiori immediately spoke with a tone sharper than usual.

“Isn’t this a portrait? It’s not a sketch anyway. I think even if I move a bit…”

“No!”

“…”

The hand moving to my cheeks stopped. I thought I saw this posture somewhere. Right, this was what Akiko usually do. This was why I was a bit embarrassed.

“Is it done yet?”

“Almost…”

When Shiori finally looked away from her sketchbook, it was already the end of the lunch break.

“Okay?”

After I removed myself from Akiko’s posture that I had got used to, I twitched my wrist and decided to have a look at the drawing, but Shiori covered it with her hands.

“You can’t get angry after you see it.”

“I won’t.”

Smiling, I removed her hand. Then , I was stunned.

“How’s it?”

How was it?

It was a child-like drawing. It was almost, no completely the same style as the drawing Kaori gave me. She had made no progress.

The weak, artistic image of Shiori in my heart was quickly blown into pieces.

“Shiori.”

I patted her shoulders.

“To be honest, I don’t think you should draw.”

“…Really?”

“As you say,” Shiori said to herself softly, as if she had first known the answer already. I regret for being a little too direct.

“But can you give me this portrait?”

“You really want this?”

“Yeah. It’s because you drew it for me. I’m happy no matter what it is.”

“You sound too flattery, but I like it.”

Smiling, Shiori tore the paper and gave it to me.

The bell for the end of the lunch break rang at the same time.

Having parted with Shiori, I walked back to the classroom, holding the portrait, which Kitagawa caught sharply.

“What are you holding? A portrait, I see.”

He quickly took the paper from my hand and looked at it. He was stunned, certainly, at the spot.

Nayuki and some other students, standing beside him, took a look too after being intrigued by our conversation. Then they fell silent too.

“…What an unorthodox drawing.”

Nayuki forced herself to make a comment. “It isn’t unorthodox, it’s just plain bad,” someone said, and others laughed.

Nayuki looked at me with a face that was asking me whether she should laugh. Fury was massing in me. It was bad, sure, but Shiori did her best to drew it.

“But even primary students cannot draw something like that.”

“What the hell are you saying?”

Someone pulled me from behind, stopping me from bursting out.

“Isn’t this a good drawing?”

A person with long wavy hair chipped into the crowd.

“The skills aren’t good, but it contained the drawer’s warmth.”

Kaori took the drawing that was almost publicly displayed, rolled it carefully, and handed it to me.

“…yeah, you’re right.”

Kitagawa immediately agreed with Kaori. Others seemed to be inclining to Kaori's opinion, and apologised to me.

They apologised, but I couldn't just forget what rude things they had spat. Even more worrying was Kaori's attitude towards this incident.

The teacher then came into the classroom, and the students returned to their seats.

I stole a peek at Kaori sitting at the back diagonally from me.

Did she knew it was Shiori who drew the drawing? Or was it that she could tell it was her drawing from its *distinctive* features?

If that was the case, there was something I had to do this week.

With that in mind, I turned to Nayuki who sat in front of Kaori.

I wrote a memo, poked Nayuki besdie me, and gave it to her.

Nayuki seemed to have fallen into afternoon slumber, and made a soft squeak when I poked her. The teacher almost found out about the memo.

After school, I met with Shiori again.

On the way home, walking with her here and there was also Shiori's important dream.

“Let's go, Yuichi-senpai.”

“How about the shopping district? Today I'm going to treat you something you like to eat.”

“Woah. Really?”

“But I have to choose the restaurant.”

“I can't wait.”

Shiori walked to the shopping district with a light jumping pace.

“Here it is.”

Many pots and flowers were growing out of the window and the wall. As the name ‘A Hundred Flowers’ gives, it is said that flowers grow in this shop in all four seasons.

“My cousin told me the strawberry parfait here is delicious.”

I pushed the dark brown door.

“What a beautiful shop…”

The floor was the same colour as the door; silk crosses were hung on the table, while wreaths made with dry flowers on the wall.

This indeed seemed a shop girls would like. In this period, it was filled with female students and lovers. The air was stuffed with noise, coffee aroma, and other desserts and sweets.

"This place is great. I've always dreamed of coming to a place like this."

Shiori praised with awe. We lucked out and had a seat near the window.

Having received the menu, Shiori examined one item after the other.

"Yuichi-senpai, you're treating me, right?"

"You can think it like that."

"Can I pick whatever I want?"

"...Of course."

The shop assistant then came over to ask what we wanted to order.

"Coffee, please."

"I want this, the Giga Deluxe Assorted Buffet."

"Okay."

The shop assistant took her menu and walked away.

"Hey, Shiori."

While wiping my hand with a towel, I asked the smiling girl.

"What food is that thing you called with that strange name?"

"It's a buffet."

"You said giga or something. I guess it'd be huge."

"Yes. Because it costs 3500 yen."

"Three..."

I stopped. This price could get me an album with two CDs.

"I can't wait."

No, I couldn't say it. It was I who said she could pick anything.

And today...

The doorbell rang and new customers came in.

"I think I'm going to retreat...."

"Woah, don't suddenly go outside!"

"I don't feel like going to this place today."

They came. I looked at the two people standing at the door.

"I'm treating you today. The strawberry parfait here is delicious."

"I know. I've come several times."

"Didn't you skip lunch lately? You have to eat, otherwise its' bad for your body."

"...Okay, if you say so, Nayuki..."

She stopped halfway.

"My sister..."

The girl sitting to the same table as me called her in a voice as if no one could possibly hear.

"Hey, isn't that Nayuki and Kaori? These seats are still vacant, why don't they come and sit with us?"

I called to the two of them who walked in at last.

Although I made a face at Nayuki, she didn't seem to notice and was preoccupied with looking at the blackboard written 'Today's Special'.

I guess it was fine.

The four of us sat around the table.



Shiori showed a stiff smile. Kaori looked down blankly.

Nayuki broke the ice, "Well, it's the first time we met, right?"

"Oh, it's nice to meet you. Hello."

"I'm not speaking to you, Yuichi..."

"Hello. Nice to meet you."

Shiori spoke with a polite and distancing attitude, lightly lowering her head.

"I'm Nayuki Minase, Yuichi's cousin. This is my friend, Misaka Kaori."

"...I'm Shiori."

Shoiri didn't tell her her surname. Nayuki didn't ask her what it was.

A female shop assistant in an apron came to take the order.

"A strawberry parfait, please."

"Weren't you looking at the Specials?"

"I thought about it, and decided to have a strawberry parfait. What about you, Kaori?"

"...Orange juice."

Nayuki looked very worried that Nayuki didn't pick anything to eat, but the shop assistant just said, "Thank you for your order," and walked to the counter.

The sunlight shone through the windows onto the flowers and the girls. Yet the atmosphere was sullen.

"What did you order, Shiori?"

The one to start the conversation was still Nayuki. It seemed she wanted to kill the silence, or perhaps she was just talking, being unaffected by the atmosphere.

"I ordered the Giga Deluxe Assorted Buffet.

"Woah. I have always wanted to try that one."

"Then why don't we share?"

"Can I?"

"Yes. Because Yuichi-senpai is treating us."

"...Yuichi, you're rich..."

Nayuki looked at me enviously.

"I don't have that much, really..."

"Yuichi-senpai said we can order whatever we want."

"Really? I think I want to order a strawberry crepe."

"That sounds delicious too."

"Hey, wait!"

Nayuki and Shiori laughed softly at my irritated face. The tension was successfully resolved, but Kaori was still looking down.

"Here is your order. Thanks for waiting."

In the end, on the table were a normal cup of coffee, orange juice, a strawberry parfait in a triangular glass vessel, and something like a glass washing bowl.

"...Hey, is this the big guy?"

In the glass washing bowl were vast amounts of ice cream, topped with fruits and flooding cream. Pretzels and biscuits splashed with bright syrup were inserted in it artistically.

"It's huge..."

Shiori looked impressed. But would she be able to finish it, given her usual small appetite?

“We have to eat this together.”

I guess it was made to be shared anyway. Four spoons were now stuck on that massive thing.

“Good.”

“I’m still worrying whether we can finish it even if we all eat this…”

Nayuki and I took our spoons. Only Kaori drank her juice silently.

Shiori showed a bit of loneliness, but it was quickly changed to a smile. “Thanks for the food,” she said, getting her first spoon of ice cream.

“It’s fantastic.”

“Some shops mix watery ice cream in their assorted buffet, but ‘A Hundred Flowers’ uses quality ice cream even at the bottom. That’s why it’s so good.”

I calmly shoved my spoon to Kaori.

“Aren’t you eating too, Kaori?”

“…”

She didn’t even respond.

If I had to experience the pain of losing her, it would have been better if I hadn’t had a sister in the first place.

On that day, in the snow, Kaori cried in front of my chest. What now *is* she thinking?

It was painful for her. She should be enveloped in fury to see Shiori sitting in the same table as me.

But if she really were angry, she shouldn’t have stayed here.

The afternoon sunlight gently shone on Shiori, Nayuki, and Kaori.

“Eat more, Yuichi…”

Nayuki spoke, dismayed. A closer look revealed that even though Shiori and Nayuki worked so hard, they couldn't manage the assorted buffet.

“It’s delicious.”

Smiling, Shiori encouraged me to eat more. Still her lowered left shoulder betrayed her depression.

“Can you still do it, Shiori?”

“It’s a bit sad, but…”

“It’s fine. You can stop eating if you want, Shiori.”

“I can still manage.”

Shiori insisted she should work hard to finish it because she was the one who ordered it. I thought her reason adorable.

“You don’t need to force yourself. Nayuki, you’re also full from the parfait you ordered for yourself, right? Let me take on the rest.”

“Eh, really?”

“Don’t you know I’m called the Dessert King Yuichi Aizawa?”

Of course, no one would believe, but it was just the striking line for what I was going to do. I took the glass bowl to myself and started wolfing down chunks of ice cream and fruits. When it got too sweet, I gulped some coffee to relieve it with its bitterness.

“It really shrank…”

Nayuki’s and Shiori’s eyes were glued to what I was doing.

The sweetness was slowly going away, replaced by the plain numbness of swallowing icy solids. Still I pushed myself to continue. It occurred to me somehow that the curry before and the assorted deluxe now would make me fat if I got along with Shiori.

Fatness meant nothing, but ‘that day’ would really come.

“Two bites to go.”

“One bite only.”

“…I’m done…”

I threw myself on the table like a marathon runner touching the finishing line.

“Congratulations.”

“Yuichi, you’re incredible.”

I looked up upon hearing the two praising voices, showing off with a haughty look.

But when my head was lifted, Nayuki and Shiori spurted out laughter.

“Yuichi, cream is on your face…”

“And two colours of syrup…”

“D-Don’t mind the details.”

“…hehehe.…”

I looked at Kaori with astonishment. Her expressionless face was turned to laughter upon seeing my face.

“Aizawa-kun is…funny…”

Kaori laughed out loud. Her softened look made Shiori happy from the inside.

The sisters were smiling in the same place.

My chest was getting hot. I forgot the pain from the coldness in my stomach.

“It was fun today.”

Nayuki and Shiori was still standing around talking after we left the shop.

“Yeah. Why don’t we have lunch at school together next time?”

“Can we?”

“Of course, because you are an important person to Yuichi, Shiori.”

“Eh…”

Shoiri looked down as her face reddened.

“Hey, what do you mean by that?”

It was embarrassing for her to speak of this important person in front of others.

“Aren’t you Yuichi’s girlfriend? Even though it’s a bit sad you’re given to Yuichi…”

“Mind your own business.”

I stood beside Shiori who was getting more and more flustered and said deliberately in a crude tone.

“Yeah, s

Kaori who had been silent till now murmured in an even more crude voice.

“You too.”

“It *is* my business.”

Kaori looked gently at Shiori.

“Because Shiori is my sister.”

“Eh…”

Kaori said it out of the blue. It stunned Shiori, who opened her eyes wide.

“I’m heading back.”

Kaori turned away, in a bit of shame.

“I’m done with spending time with Nayuki.”

And so she left. I gave a push to Shiori, who was still stunned.

Shiori nodded and chased Kaori.

"...Hey wait, sister."

Then she turned around and flashed a smile at me.

"See you tomorrow, Yuichi-senpai."

"See you."

"...Thank you..."

Shiori gave a bow with her head lowered, and vanished along the direction of the setting sun.

"I see."

On our way home, while we were leaving the shopping district in the evening, Nayuki spoke.

"When you gave me that memo on the lesson, I wondered what it was."

Nayuki took the memo from her pocket.

"Nayuki, you're Kaori's best friend, right? Can you bring Kaori to 'A Hundred Flowers' today? Thanks."

"You don't have to take it out."

I wanted to snatch away the memo, but Nayuki evaded.

"Do you know what's going on with Kaori and Shiori?"

Nayuki shook her head.

"Kaori don't really talk about herself."

"I can tell."

"But I know something is bothering her. And since you asked her about her sister, I thought it would be related to the memo you gave me. I trusted you and did what you told me to."

"Incredible. Even though you look to be spacing off most of the time. You're my cousin all right."

"You can leave out that spacing off aspect of me," Nayuki said, pouting.

"It would be great if they could get along with each other."

"If they could, yeah."

Problems and tension in people's hearts wouldn't be solved with a snap.

Probably, Kaori would hate me afterwards.

But her acknowledgement of her sister was good enough.

"Yuichi, you treasure Shiori very much."

"...Yeah."

What I did today wasn't really for Kaori, but for Shiori. In Shiori's dream, there was something that couldn't become true. Still, I thrive to make it true.

"By the way, can you still eat dinner tonight?"

"I have another stomach for desserts. No problem."

"Yuichi, you sound like a girl..."

We had almost arrived at the end of the shopping district when I saw something yellow at the edge of my view. I quickly looked to the other side.

Ayu was beside the shop selling kid stuff. She seemed looking for something, or waiting for someone, prying into the shop, looking at the wave of people in and out.

But when I wanted to call her, she had run off from my field of view.

"Eh?"

Nayuki seemed to follow my gaze and caught sight of a winged backpack.

"What, do you know Ayu?"

"Is she called...Ayu?"

"What do you know about her?"

I was uneasy about Nayuki's rare stammer.

"Forget about it. I must have been thinking too much. I'm sorry," Nayuki said, and continued advancing.

Letting that question hang around in my mind, I followed her.

Chapter 6 - In the Snowy Night

Time flowed in this dreamy week.

Shiori and I had gone to the ice cream shop in the shopping district.

We had also had lunch with Kaori, Kaori, and even Kitagawa.

"I'm very nervous with you seniors..."

Shiori stood still in the school cafeteria, seemingly nervous. I was at her side, stroking her hair.

"It'll be fine. I'm here. Nayuki and Kaori too."

"I'm here as well."

"It's your first time seeing Kitagawa, I guess."

“But I was the first person who saw Shiori in the courtyard. It would have been great if I had just gone there to meet Shiori instead of telling you.”

“I think it will end up the same.”

Kaori said coldly, making everyone laugh.

Then, after I had parted with Shiori, Kaori said to me alone on the way back to our classroom.

“It’s great we can come to this resolution.”

I didn’t know how to respond to her.

“Even if this normal lifestyle this week would be a burden to her body....”

Even if this would make her disappear earlier.

“Isn’t Shiori smiling from her heart now?”

That was all I could say.

“You have to smile too, Aizawa-kun, “Kaori said softly, looking through the windows in the corridor to the court piled up with snow, “To the final moment.”

In the court after school.

“Yuichi-senpai, you’re so late!”

Shiori pouted, waiting for me who had come late because of classroom duty.

“Sorry, I’m sorry.”

I stroked her head.

“Nayuki forced me into this. She took the broom and the towel and forced me to choose one, or else she wouldn’t let me go.”

“Are you making her as an excuse?”

“Well...”

It was a bit exaggerated, but it was true. Nayuki who pointed me to work with a smile looked scary.

But speaking more would only embarrass myself, so I apologised docilely.

“Sorry.”

“Okay, I’ll forgive you today.”

Shiori finally smiled. Heaving a sigh of relief, I wanted to let out a smile too, but I found Shiori’s face even whiter than usual.

“What are we going to do now?”

Shiori placed her index finger beside her lips. Her demeanor looked usual, though.

“Why don’t we have a stroll on the streets?”

“Why not?”

I said, smiling, dispelling the uneasiness in my heart.

It was fine. Shiori was beside me. It wasn’t the day of promise yet.

Leaving school, we went to the shopping district we had always gone to.

“If you want anything, tell me. I’ll buy it for you.”

“Woah, really?”

“If it’s below 200 yen.”

“...Yuichi-senpai, you didn’t plan to buy anything for me in the first place, am I right?”

“That’s all I’ve got here.”

Actually I had a bit more. But that was Shiori’s birthday present budget.

I hadn’t yet decided on what to buy. Today was a good chance to pry into her what she had in mind.

Along the shopping district, she would sometimes stop and look at the products in the displaying windows.

“Ah, that plushie is cute.”

Which one? I said, and then stunned upon turning my head to that direction.

It was a huge plushie that guarded the shop’s door. I couldn’t tell if it was for sale.

“I think 200 yen is impossible for that.”

“It costs 8000 yen.”

It really was for sale. Shiori went ahead and checked its price tag.

If I had to take out even my budget for her birthday present, I might manage...

“Oh, but its original price is 500 thousand yen.”

“Really? That price reduction is unimaginable.”

“Hey, look,” Shiori showed me the tag. True, the black words were crossed out, replaced with black numbers.

“Is it unpopular?”

“It’s a doll that would curse the owner to die with an unknown death.”

Shiori’s eyes flashed.

“It’s great!”

"You think so?"

I backed off a bit. Shiori nodded with affirmation.

"I want this."

"No way, it's cursed."

"We don't know whether it's cursed."

"Anyway, let's buy something more normal."

Please, don't let me be a man who gives a cursed doll to her girlfriend on her birthday.

"You sound like my taste is bad."

"Oh, look, how does that doll over that sound?"

"I hate Yuichi-senpai the most."

Shiori smiled.

"Whatever, I'd like to go into the shop for a look."

The shop was composed of a pale pink colour. Dolls and little decorations filled the interiors.

"Let me wait here. This doesn't look like a shop for man to enter."

"Really? It doesn't seem so for you, though."

Casting an upsetting comment, Shiori walked into the shop alone.

I leaned on the electric lamp beside the shop.

What should I do? If she finds a doll she like, I can buy it as a present for her (save the cursed doll). But it might be even better to give her a present that would display my effort. But if we're talking about something that would please Shiori...

At this moment, something whacked my back.

"Good afternoon, Yuichi-kun."

Ayu showed her usual smile. We didn't plan to meet here or made any arrangements, but every time I come here, she would bump into me.

"Say, Ayu."

"Yeah?"

"Do you think there would be a girl who would be happy to receive an ice cream and a shovel on her birthday?"

"I don't think so."

Ayu replied immediately.

"Well, what do you think girls would normally like to get on their birthdays?"

"Taiyaki!"

Ayu replied immediately again.

"Only you."

I denied immediately like her.

"Ugu…Yuichi-kun, do you want to give a girl a birthday present?"

"You can think of it that way."

"What kind of girl is she?"

I thought about it for a while.

"Her main food is ice ream. Her dream is to make a huge snowman. Yeah, that."

Ayu tilted her head blankly.

"So what present do you think will make her happy?"

"…Ice cream and a shovel."

"Right?"

Ayu tilted her head in thought too.

Then she asked me in an alien voice, "Is Shiori the girl you're talking about?"

"Yeah."

"I see," Ayu nodded, smiling. The smile she had now was subtly different from the one her energetic self put on.

"Does Shiori have other interests?"

"Interests? Oh, she likes drawing."

"That's it!"

Ayu clapped her gloved hands and said, "Shiori fits drawing." I wanted to tell her she could say that because she hadn't seen her drawings, but if I had to buy drawing tools, there were many choices and very accessible. Shiori would also be very happy.

"I've made up my mind."

After I nodded my head, Shiori had come back.

She hesitated when she saw Ayu standing with me. But Ayu ran to Shiori, almost flying into her, waving.

"She's with you today again, Yuichi-kun!"

"Yeah."

Shiori's face reddened with a smile. Ayu nodded affirmatively and exchanged looks with me and Shiori.

"Yuichi-kun and Shiori really look like close siblings."

"Siblings..."

Shiori sneaked a peak at me.

"Wrong, Ayu."

I softly placed my hand on Shiori's small shoulder.

"We're...couples."

Even though it was embarrassing, I had to say it.

"I see..."

Ayu sucked in air with an "ah" sound. Shiori said, calmly, "I didn't even know that too."

"Shiori..."

"I'm joking."

It was painful to me even if it was a joke.

"Ahaha."

Ayu smiled at my pitiful look. But her smile was different her usual one. It carried a touch of loneliness. Or was I too mindful?

"So which park are we going now?"

I was having a date with the person I like, yet I couldn't help inviting Ayu.

But Ayu shook her head, her smile intact.

"I think I have to go."

With that said, she turned away, but then turned back and whispered to me, "It's great to be with you, to think up what present to give to Shiori."

"Ayu," I asked unintentionally, "are you still looking for that thing?"

Ayu exchanged glances with me and Shiori beside me. Then she smiled shamefully.

"...No. I think I've found it already."

Then it was 31st January, Sunday.

Even though sunlight poured in through the crevices of the clouds, the sky was a shade of grey. The wind was cold and penetrating. It wouldn't be a surprise if it snowed. This was a common day in winter here.

Today was a weekend. Dates we had before spanned only half a day, but now I could spend the entire day with her. Excited, I came to the meeting place fifteen minutes earlier.

Shiori came five minutes before the meeting time. She wved at me, her cape fluttering.

"Am I late?"

"No, I'm early."

"I'm telling you, Yuichi-senpai, it's fine to come later."

Shiori puffed white smoke in a hurry. Had she been rushing here?

"Didn't you get mad at me for being late?"

"But I want to be earlier than you today too."

"What reason is that?"

Shiori smiled. Except for her skinnier face and tired voice, her smile was as bright as ever.

"By the way, what bag is that?"

Shiori who usually had nothing in her hands had now oddly a rectangular bag wrapped by cloth.

Proud, Shiori took out the box inside, which of course was rectangular as well.

"It's a lunchbox."

"Did you make it?"

"Yeah. Because I promised you I'd do so."

"Okay. I look forward to it."

"You sure do!"

"Taste aside."

"...I hate Yuichi-senpai the most."

Having repeated things we had once being saying over and over again, we started walking.

"So where are we heading? Since we have a lunchbox, let's find a place we can eat it."

"Okay, a place you know would do."

"But I know only a few places. The house I'm living in, the school, the shopping district, and the park you took me to..."

"I want to have a look at your house."

I stopped at the little choices I had.

“Can I?”

I was joking about my house, but Shiori looked serious.

“You can…but it’s just a regular house.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Then it’s good.”

I was also a healthy young man. I would be glad to invite a girl to my house.

Of course, I didn’t tell her so. I just moved my lips.

Shiori lowered her head and looked up at me only with her eyes.

“Yuichi-senpai, I guess you aren’t thinking anything funny, are you?”

“Come, we’d have to go if we’ve decided.”

“Woah. That’s not an answer.”

Although my back was poked with a complaining voice, Shiori followed me.

On the way, Shiori didn’t forget to take a trip to the shopping district to buy some ice cream she liked.

Returning home so early, Akiko was a bit surprised, but…

“Nice to meet you. I’m Shiori Misaka.”

Shiori’s careful bow made her understand immediately.

“Welcome, Shiori. It’s a small house, but please make yourself comfortable.”

“Thanks.”

“If Yuichi does anything funny, remember to scream.”

“Okay. I know.”

Looking at their cheerful conversation, I was a bit let down.

“Yuichi.”

After Shiori had ascended to the second floor, Akiko quietly called me to the living room.

Akiko seemed worried. I thought I would be lectured, but what should she said blew me off.

“Did you take Shiori home because her condition is severe?”

Shiori herself knew she looked bad. I didn’t pay much attention, but it had become so serious it could be noticed by a glimpse by someone else.

"No…Well, don't mind. Shiori's face looked white and poor from the beginning."

I tried to pretend calm.

"I see. I worry too much. Sorry."

Akiko returned to her room with a smile. I whacked my trembling legs that betrayed my emotions and went up the second floor. Shiori was waiting at the door of the room politely. I told her it was nothing big, opened the door, and invited her in.

"So this is your room, Yuichi-senpai."

Shiori looked around, curious.

"It's beautiful. It's even more tidy than mine."

"Because I have only lived here for less than a month."

That was about the time I had come to know Shiori. I said, and Shiori, seemingly excited, looked at the windows and touched the furniture.

There wasn't even a table in the room, so we stacked some magazines in the centre of the room, and placed the lunch box and Shiori's ice cream on top.

"I threw some dry ice inside, so it can wait longer."

"But we don't have anywhere to sit."

There was not mat or sitting cushion. Shiori said it was fine and sat on the wooden floor, leaning on the side of the bed.

"Oh wait, why don't we lay the cape on the floor?"

"No," Shiori said and pulled the cape on her body.

"I like this cape."

"So you're always wearing it."

I sat beside her and pulled a side of the cape.

"No. I only have one."

"Then I'll knit a new one for you."

"Woah. You will?"

"I'm joking."

"I'm glad. Is it handmade? Is it Yuichi-senpai's handmade cape?"

Shiori said with a singing tone.

"No…wait, I said I don't knit."

"You can by some reading."

"I don't even know how to hold that stick."

"It doesn't mind. You only have to spend some time, and one day you'll…"

Shiori suddenly stopped, but she continued, smiling, "One day…"

Shiori's voice trembled. It wasn't worth mentioning in casual chat, but these two simple words just foretold the ending of this dream.

And today was the last today of this week.

Shiori's face, her shadow, her breath, even her handmade lunch box, everything was a dream that was going to end today.

Even I could feel this oppressing reality. I could also feel it coming from Kaori's and Akiko's words.

'One day', it would happen to us.

This was reality.

"Shiori."

"Woah, Yuichi-senpai."

Shiori's troubled voice because of the sudden embrace threw me even in more pain.

"…I'm depressed."

In my arms, Shiori was small and frail, but she felt softer and warmer than what I had imagined.

I grasped her hand, stroked her head, letting her head to turn upwards at me.

"Woah, no…"

I stole a kiss without letting her finished what she had been saying. My heart's waver flowed to my chest. My heart jumped madly. Shiori didn't reject my kiss. Over her closed eyes, her eyelashes with moderate thickness trembled.

I pulled off my face slowly, and Shiori lowered her head, her face completely red.

"People who do these things…"

"I love them."

I broke off what she said again. This time I gently embraced her, as if encircling her entire body.

"I have always loved you, Shiori."

"…"

"So from now on, I would only love you, no one else."

"You're saying something very embarrassing, Yuichi-senpai."

Shiori put her head to my chest like a spoiled child. I held her. She was light, surprisingly light.

Throwiung the cape behind her, Shiori lay on the bed.

“If you feel bad, or if you want to stop, you can say it.”

As if treating something that would easily break, I quietly moved my hands from her cheeks to her neck.

“That’s cruel. If you’re being so gentle on me, I couldn’t say no if I wanted to…”

She leaned her face to my hand that was caressing her cheeks.

“I love you too, Yuichi-senpai.”

Some tears glistened from her eyes. Her body shivered lightly.

I softly and lovingly held her body, moved my hand to the shoulder strap of the dress and unfastened it. Although Shiori’s body was tense, she didn’t go against it. Thus after I slowly pulled her dress down, her upper body was only left with a white sweater

Below the sweater I could see completely white panties.

Shiori didn’t cover it, but held her own body with a troubled face.

“Please don’t stare at it for so long…”

Shiori turned her flushed face to a side.

“I’ll become very embarrassed.”

She tightened her body, lifting her thin waist and then her thin thighs. Whenever I touch her smooth beautiful thighs that were now clean without stockings, her back would twitch, and she would bite her lips as if suppressing her inner uneasiness.

“…Uuh…”

Even so, she made small sounds. Her obstinateness and poor face was adorable, driving me more excited in getting every last part of her.

I laid horizontally beside her as if sleeping with her. I whispered beside her small ears, “I want to look more of you, Shoiri.”

Her face utterly red, she moved her head back, at a loss of what to say.

“I hate people who say those things…but…I don’t object to it,” she said, in an almost inaudible husky voice. I caught the lower part of her sweater and pulled it up. Her even chest, and the smooth curve of her body. In contrast there was two cute and content swollen parts covered with white cups.

“I…I…uh…”

Lightly sucking in air, Shiori said as if talking to herself.



Shiori suddenly turned around. “I’m not a child anymore,” she said with a strong nosed voice, tears flowing,

“It’s because it’s Yuichi-senpai that I would…”

As she made deep trembling breaths, she endeavoured to calm herself down.

It was natural to do this stuff with your lover. There was no need to apologise. She felt nervous because this was her first time, but she tried to accept me.

“I know.”

I felt the same. As I embraced her, I imagined being one with her, and started again in touching it. Shiori was still trembling, but now she didn’t use her hand to wave it off. Covering it with a palm, I slowly, very slowly used my finger to sink inside it. Shiori bit her lips and withstood the sensations of her very first time.

I wanted to feel the warmth and softness of it directly, so I approached the white panties with my hand.

“Yui…”

Shiori moved only her lips to call my name. After giving another kiss on her small and thin lips, I pulled her panties down over her thighs. Out of some reflex, Shiori turned around to hide away her body from me.

“It’s fine.”

I turned her back around and met my eyes with her. When I decided to take off the only piece of clothing, her sweater, she pressed her hand against mine to stop me.

“I’ll take it off myself…”

Shiori lightly raised her upper body and took it off. As if embarrassed from being looked at while doing this, she did it with my side facing her. Her dry and cool hair danced to the static electricity of the sweater. I held her small back. She turned around to reach my chest. We looked at each other and lay down again. I softly touched that place again.

“Uu…”

Burying her face in my chest, she had let everything fall under my control. I used to fingers to caress the centre of her body. Her body twitched backwards. After several times, it started to become damp.

Teardrops surfaced on her eyes again. Embarrassment had never ceased, even when—this was what she wished for.

I wanted to feel more of her living body. Not in a dream, or a play, or a story, but to forget everything and to conglomerate everything she and I had in the real world into one.

“Can I, Shiori?”

I held her again.

I will never be afraid.

I will accept all of you, to the very last moment.

And then we opened the lunch box she made.

“There’s a lot, so eat as much as you want.”

Like she said, it was a stuffed one. Except for the common hamburger meat, scrambled eggs, and fried shrimp, there were also simmer-fried stuff, jellied Chinese cabbage. It was a packed deluxe lunch box. And the fruits were placed inside without being cut. The sushis were almost as big as softballs.

“I made it for you too, so I got excited and made a bit too much.”

Still, Shiori didn’t attack the lunch box with me. She just ate her almost melting ice cream with gusto.

I finished the whole lunch box. At first I was a bit worried, but after eating several times with Shiori, I thought my stomach had been enlarged somehow.

After the meal, I enjoyed lying on Shiori’s thighs. After that, we went outside.



“...Uu, it’s cold.”

I raised the collar of my coat and shivered. It had started snowing again.

“But the air outside is refreshing.”

Shiori looked up at the sky, touching the snowflakes with her cheeks.

Looking blankly at the side of her face with her eyes closed, I was shocked.

Shiori’s usual white and even transparent face was now really red. Worried, I held her hand.

Her small and soft hand was no doubt hot.

“Don’t you have a fever, Shiori?”

“Well...”

“This isn’t the time for that.”

I seriously said to the smiling Shiori.

“Don’t worry. It’s only a small one.”:

It may be a small one to others, but to her it might not.

Did that episode in the room burdened her body? I injured her because I didn't take control of my own emotions…

"It's not what you think."

Reading my face of what I was having in mind, Shiori shook her head without asking.

"I'm happy."

She warmed my cold hand with her heated one.

"Yuichi-senpai, you treated me like a normal girl."

"Shiori…"

"So I have to stay with you today, for the entire day."

"There are still many places I want to go to," Shiori said, walking ahead by herself.

"Honestly, is it okay?"

"Yeah."

"Don't push yourself."

"Okay!"

Shiori nodded, smiling. No matter how I dissuade her, she would push herself. I knew this, but I couldn't win over that smile. And today hadn't ended yet. Today was still the dream we two held.

"Where should we go then?"

"I want to go to the arcade?"

"Oh, do you want to take revenge?"

"I won't lose today!"

In the end, even though the moles still laughed at her, her score was a lot better than zero.

Following that, we went to the school.

In the school grounds with no one else, we ran to our classrooms, scribbled some nonsense on the blackboard and got excited at doing something naughty.

The snowflakes falling from the sky had got slower, and we arrived at the court.

"When I first saw you here wearing causal clothes, it really freaked me out."

"Do I look like this?"

Shiori put on her cape as she did back then and looked up at the windows from the court.

"Well, you had someone you want to see when you came here, hadn't you?"

“Yeah.”

“Did you see that person?”

“I saw him. Like listening to my wish, that person left from the place behind the windows I looked at and came to the court to check up on that weird person waiting for him.”

“Oh,” I said, getting embarrassed at my own question.

In the dusk, we looked at the passing orange clouds, while strolling along the path shaded by trees, the place we first met.

“Ayu and I got lost here that created our encounter.”

“You’re right. I rarely go outside, but that day I had to buy something at the convenience shop.”

“I see...”

I had almost forgotten about that, but now I remembered. Snow on her head, she blankly...or should I say she sat still, as if scared of something.

“That day, I...”

On her middle of speech, Shiori held my hand tightly. The heat on her hand became stronger, but I returned the grasp without saying anything.

The road became wider as we came to the end of the path.

Before the sunset, we came to the park we had our first kiss.

We silently held hands, looking at the fountain.

The night scene had already enshrouded our surroundings, but under the reflection against the snow by the pale illumination, the round plaza carried blue hues.

When was the last time we had a snow fight here?

Probably less than a month, but it felt like many years ago, for every day I spent with Shiori was as ample as half a year.

And those last several hours too...

“I’m a bit tired.”

Shiori leaned on me.

“Yeah, because we walked a lot today.”

Shiori seemed to be falling down. I quickly held her.

“Hahaha...we did.”

“We did a bit too much.”

Though I said it like that, I knew it wasn’t that much. Still, Shiori nodded her assent.

“Don’t you regret, Yuichi-senpai?”

Shiori asked softly, maintaining her smile.

“Finally, we have come to this day.”

“From now on, till forever, I won’t regret.”

Suppressing the emotions shooting to my heart, I tightened my embrace on Shiori.

“Yuichi-senpai, you’re strong.”

“No. You’re strong.”

Shiori who could lose her smile at any possible moment told me what being strong trully meant.

Shiori slowly shook her head and rolled up her left hand’s sleeve. In the centre appeared two blood vessels on her wrist. Across them was a white, fine and long cutting trace.

“On the night after I met you and Ayu at that shaded path, I did this to myself.”

Shiori started speaking calmly.

“Before that day, I hated myself very much.”

Her body was weak, poor, only causing others trouble.

Compared to her beautiful, clever, and healthy sister, she had nothing.

She was said she couldn’t live to her next birthday. She didn’t have the right to be sorrowful. So she smiled. She didn’t want to cause anyone trouble. If she lived in this world, she would only cause pain to the people she love. So she thought it would have been better if she disappeared earlier.

“I went to the convenience store and bought a cutting knife. I know it was not necessary, but I also bought a lot of other things. And finally because I like the snowing scene I took the longer path.”

On her way, she met Yuichi and Ayu.

“When the snow fell on my head, and the things spilled from my bag, I was very afraid of letting others know what I was thinking.”

“I can understand…”

I finally understood what her face meant that day.

“Then that night…I was alone in the house. In my room, I turned off the lights.”

She could see nothing. She could hear nothing. There was no space for thinking. She was alone, left alone in this world. While she drenched herself in thoughts, she knew what kind of world that was awaiting her. She took out the cutting knife she bought, gripped the yellow handle, and pushed out the sharp blade.

Slowly, with a deep breath, she placed the blade on her left wrist and slashed swiftly.

"On my left hand was a red line."

Shiori stroked on the white, swelled line.

"I couldn't think of anything at that time. Then I hear something."

It was Yuichi-senpai's and Ayu's laughter.

"They were cheerful voices. Hearing them, and comparing myself to them, I felt I was too tragic. As if brought along with the voices, I laughed."

For her sister and her family and kept on putting on a feigned smile, it had been a long time since she had smiled from the bottom of her heart.

"When I started, I couldn't stop. I laughed so much my tears wouldn't stop. My left hand was painful. After some time did I found out that I was only crying in sorrow."

After that…

"After laughing and crying, I couldn't manage to cut my wrist."

From that night on, Shiori's smile became a true smile.

I didn't say anything like "I understand" and just agreed with her inside.

"So I am not strong. On that day, if I hadn't met you and Ayu, I would have…No, if you hadn't been willing to stay by my side, I would still have taken the same path."

Shiori's clear eyes reflected the droplets of the fountain, twinkling.

"Perhaps this is a miracle."

It was getting darker, the snow heavier.

White snow danced in this white world.

"I want to lie down and take a nap…"

As if talking in her sleep, Shiori said vaguely.

"Okay, let me take you to the bench."

Shiori shook her head weakly to stop me and pointed to the grass on the ground covered with snow.

"That's good."

"But…"

"My body's hot. I want to lie down on the snow. It's cool and comfortable."

"…"

"Because I like snow."

I remembered she said something similar before, so I did as she said.



Shiori caught in her hands the petal-like snowflakes falling down.

“It’s beautiful…”

If this continued, the snow would engulf Shiori, with her snow-like white skin. I lay with half of my back on the ground beside her. The snow was chilly and painful, but now all I could was its comfortable coolness.

“Thank you, Yuichi-senpai.”

Shiori’s hand that I held was warm now, but…

“I’m so lucky to have met you, to have been together, eating ice cream, strolling through the shopping district, whacking moles…going to the same school, meeting friends, drawing a portrait for you…being taken to the café.”

“Yeah…”

“On that night, I could talk with my sister again after so long.”

“Yeah.”

“One thing aside, you have made all my wishes come true.”

“One thing aside?”

“I only didn’t have the chance to make a huge snowman. What a shame.”

We looked at each other and smiled.

The snow slowly piled up on our bodies.

“It’s called a miracle because it doesn’t happen.”

I talked, imitating her tone.

“But I think there are still some possibilities. That’s what a miracle really is.”

“…”

Shiori shook her head with a sad smile, but I continued, “So if a miracle does happen…”

Suddenly Shiori looked up at the clock on the pillar at a corner of the park. I looked at it too.

After a few minutes, the clock would point to the next day.

“After a while, there would only be an age gap of one year between you and me.”

“I bought a birthday present for you.”

“I’m happy.”

“It’s quite expensive.”

“But wait, just a little longer.”

The hands on the clock slowly, like us, closed their distance,

Shiori whispered in my arms.

“Did I get over it smiling?”

“Have I kept my smile?”

“Yeah, don’t worry,” I replied, holding her tighter.

“...Thanks.”

With that, as the hands of the clock landed on each other, so did our lips.



Happy birthday.

Shiori.

Then the girl I loved said only one thing.

“Goodbye, Yuichi-senpai.”

Epilogue

Today, in the morning of the Minase household, it started with my helpless howl.

“Wake up! Hey, wake up, Nayuki!”

I banged the door.

“Mm...”

“Nayuki, Yuichi. Breakfast’s ready.”

“I’m coming now! Hey, can you hear Akiko calling you?”

Bang, bang, bang, bang.

“Ku?”

After a day's bang, Nayuki came out of the room at last with her eyes half-closed.

"I don't want to run to school with you any longer!"

Even though I said that, I still run with Nayuki every morning to school.

"We're out."

Morning with bright sunlight and cool wind.

"It's already spring…"

We should be running for our lives, yet Nayuki comfortably greeted the wind.

I didn't know what to say—to call her capable as the captain of the track team, or explain to her her conceitedness.

"Oh, it's sakura petals."

Smiling, Nayuki caught the falling petals.

Every day felt like repeating the same scenery, but the seasons do change, albeit slowly.

"Nayuki, do you like the spring?"

"Yeah! How about you?"

"I think the winter's better."

"Why? Don't you hate the cold?"

"I still hate it now."

Sadly, I couldn't make snowmen in the spring.

During lunch break, I walked to the cafeteria with the same person.

"Aizawa, you're still eating curry? The best thing now is Chinese rice with meat and vegetables, you know."

"Mind your own business. I like curry."

I rejected Hitagawa's recommendation.

Nayuki looked at my plate with awe.

"It's fine, but why are you always eating double servings?"

"Because I seem to have a bigger appetite."

"You don't eat that much at home."

Nayuki showed confusion with her tilted head.

"It's about time for people to show up in the court."

Kaori looked through the wide windows. The court was only unpopular in the winter. In the warm seasons, many students like to go there to have their outdoor lunch.

Abruptly, I stood up and checked the refrigerator at the counter.

I didn't know whether it had been sold out or it didn't restock. It was empty inside.

Was it because of the warmer weather? Students do surprisingly know what is best to eat at the court.

Days were tranquil, but I didn't feel bored passing each and every day.

One time, when I ran an errand for Akiko to buy something at the shopping district, Nayuki suddenly said something.

"Speaking of which, that girl…have you ever met Ayu recently, Yuichi?"

"No. It's pass the season for taiyakis. I bet she's gone to hibernate for the spring."

"Hibernating in the spring, uh?"

"Don't mind the details. Why are you bringing her up?"

"Because I'm starting to remember something."

The two of them met Ayu in front of the shop selling kid's stuff.

"Do you remember a girl you really got along with in this town seven years ago?"

"…I've forgotten already, but now that you say so, I do have an impression."

As the piled snow melted, spring slowly arrived to the streets. I gradually recovered from the memories the snow covered.

"Are you saying that she is Ayu?"

Seven years ago, though, I lost that child in front of my eyes.

The heavy sadness of the episode, how the girl sobbed, how it was painful and tragic, was enough to snatch away all the memories I had.

"If that's the case, the wings behind her bag were real."

"Mm…"

"Anyway, we'll certainly meet when the snow starts falling again."

Let's see, then.

But now…

The windows of the school were open, the curtains fluttering in the wind. The air of new life, the court filled with students, school transformed into an unfamiliar place to me.

"What are you doing here?"

Sitting alone on the bench at the court, I saw a girl wearing the uniform with a green ribbon.

“Can’t I come?”

“Well, if you don’t take a good rest at home, your curable sickness…might become incurable.”

“Don’t worry. From today onwards, I’m going to school again.”

“I see…”

I forced myself to lift up the face I had brought down and smiled mischievously.

“But if you’re starting today, you’ll have to retake the first year again.”

“I hate people who say those things.”

That was the line I liked to hear the most.

But not yet able to accept this reality, I couldn’t look straight at this girl.

“I bought a lot today.”

The girl was holding a paper bag.

“I had lunch already.”

“No. You have to finish it even if you have to force yourself.”

She passed the bag to me.

Inside, there were the vanilla flavour, but also strawberry, chocolate mint, coffee, green tea…and all other sorts of ice cream.

“Compared to the hot weather, eating it when it’s warm is better.”

“Of course.”

Moving my eyes stiffly, I finally met them with the girl’s.

Small and tender, her skin was still white as snow, but her rose-coloured cheeks and her glamorous and lively lips coupled with her clear eyes looked prettier.

The girl of snow in the cold weather had now transformed to the dazzling girl of spring.

“It’s called a miracle because it doesn’t happen.”

“Yeah.”

“Did I lie?”

“Yeah.”

“But…”

Her voice was trembling. Her usual mild smile deformed.

“It is okay if I cry now?”

“If you don’t, I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“Why?”

“Men cannot cry first, I guess.”

“Haha, figures.”

At the same time as she spoke, the bag of ice cream fell on the floor. She flew into my arms.

“Shiori…”

“Uu, uu…Yuichi…senpai…Yuichi-senpai…Yuichi-senpai…”

Shiori who had never shed a single tear in front of anyone else now bursted in tears like a child.

“Actually, I don’t want to die…I hate saying goodbye…I hate being alone…I hate it.”

I embraced tightly my lover who was sobbing. I thought I wouldn’t ever feel this warm feeling, but I did. Spring had come, certainly.



In the serene park, I could hear water moving.

At a corner, Shiori and I looked at each other, between us an aqua-blue sketchbook.

“Say, can I just move a little bit?”

“No.”

Shiori looked serious. She used crayons of many colours. The new sketchbook and the crayons were my present for her.

“When can I move?”

“When I’m finished.”

“That’s quite impossible…”

“Uu…”

Lowering her head, she looked at me with protesting eyes.

“I hate people who say those things.”

“What you said hurt me, so before I finish the entire portrait, you’ll have to remain completely still,” Shiori commanded with a finger.

Agreeing reluctantly, I fell into silence with the surroundings.

"Yuichi-senpai."

While rubbing the paper with the crayons and looking at the sketchbook, Shiori said.

"Have you thought of this? Like…we're living in someone else's dream."

"What?"

I couldn't give a good reply to this sudden thought.

Not really expecting much out of me, Shiori smiled docilely and continued, "To someone who is dreaming, we're the people appearing in that person's dream. But this is reality to us, so that person is instead in the realm of the dream."

"…"

"That person made a really long dream, as if forgotten to wake up. For a long time…Although that person is looking for the chance to wake up, that person fails to find it."

Looking for something…

"But because that person looked for and waited so long, that person got a present. That person could make a wish come true in the dream. Whatever wish it may be. Really, whatever wish…let's say…"

Shiori suddenly lifted her head up.

"if that person wished, that person could save a girl with a heavy illness."

In that instant, Shiori must be staring at that person in the realm of the dream.

"What I said sounded profound and cool, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't say it's cool, though."

"Yuichi-senpai, you're rude!"

I laughed at Shiori who was irritated.

In my heart, I knew this person. Maybe, the present this person gave us was Shiori's miracle.

Could we meet? In a dream, I meant.

Perhaps when the season of snow pays us a visit next time…

"We have to make a snow man this winter."

"A big one, right?"

"I hope it'll be 50 metres wide."

"Let's do it!"

It was spring.

The wind lightly flipped a few pages of the girl's sketchbook.

Both the girl in the drawing and the girl in front of me were smiling from the bottom of their hearts.

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